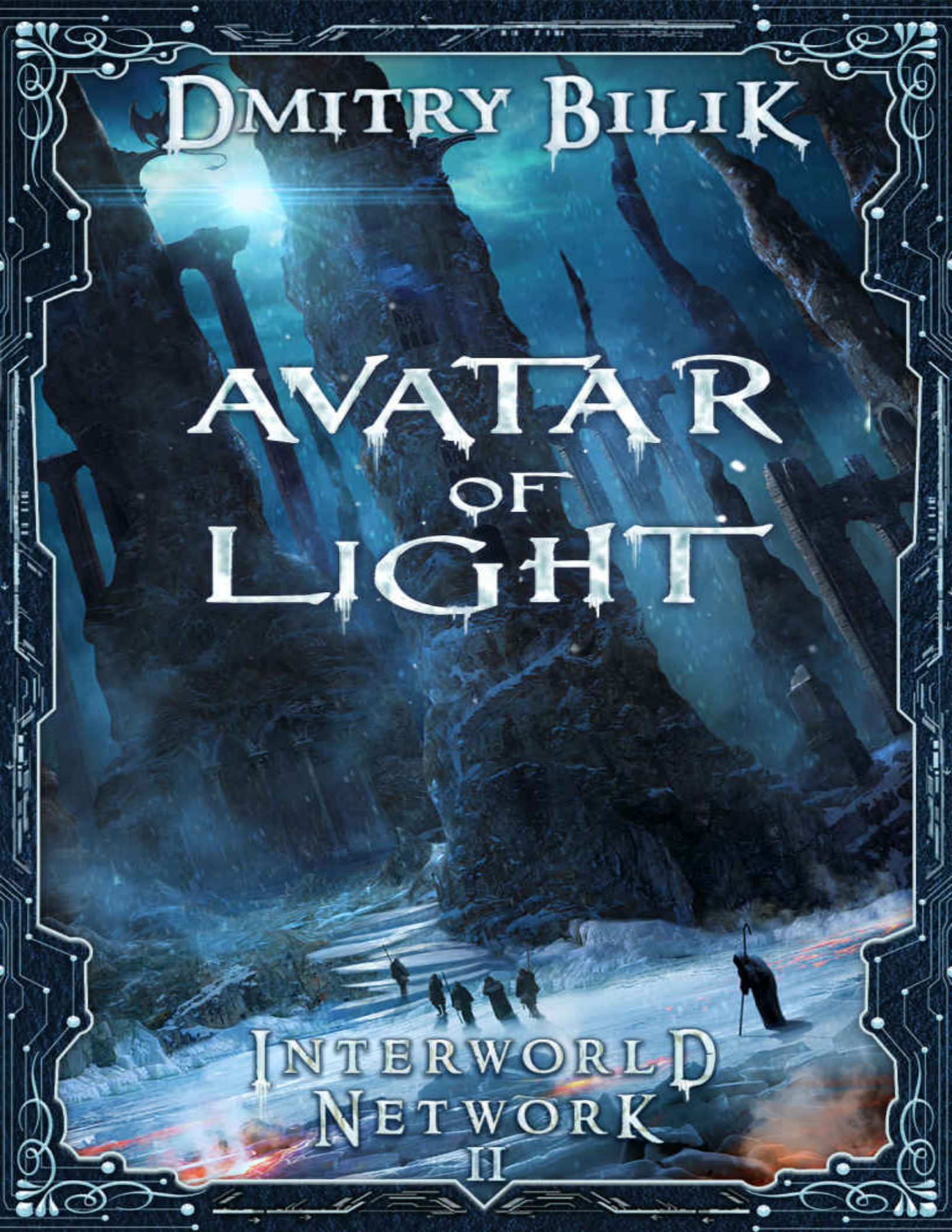
Dmitry Bilik
Avatar of Light
Interworld Network
II

Avatar of Light

a novel
by Dmitry Bilik

Interworld Network
Book#2

Magic Dome Books

Interworld Network
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Chapter 1

HEROES IN SHINING ARMOR never embarrass themselves. I can't remember any that had normal human ailments or diseases. Things like toothache, diarrhea and hemorrhoids give them a wide berth. Whatever problems they face are inevitably of the noble kind.

If they get their arm lopped off, they'll be fighting with only one hand, doubling their righteous fury. If they receive a full burst of submachine gun fire, they'll soldier on, helping their wounded friends to safety. And even if they get a bullet in the gut, they'll make sure they smoke all their enemies before they lie down and croak.

Judging by all of the above, I was nowhere near a hero. I was scared. I hurt so bad I wanted to wail with pain. Blood gushed out of my practically disemboweled belly.

The hill was dusty; *my wound might turn septic*, I thought. Can you imagine? You'd think that was the least of my problems!

Still, so far I'd managed to brave it, suppressing the desire to scream and sob in agony. It might sound funny but the thing that gave me strength wasn't the thought of my helpless friends or even the knowledge of the threat looming over humanity. No: it was common pride, pure and simple. I just couldn't lose face in front of this jeering abomination of a god.

And as for the Avatar… it had turned out to be a strange thing, really. Once I'd equipped it, the world seemed to have come into focus, as if I were a myopic patient given a pair of glasses. I could make out barely visible wisps of gray smoke snaking up over Arts, Hunter and Litius. And as for the Darkest One, you couldn't see jack next to him, so enveloped was he in his own smog. Apparently, a Divine Avatar allowed you to see other people's respective karmas.

Funnily enough, Traug turned out to belong to the Light side. His skin glowed like freshly-driven snow in the sun in February. Appearances can indeed be deceptive.

Okay, so I could see people's karmas, fair enough. Was that it? Somehow I didn't think a Divine Avatar could be so tight-fisted with its gifts. There had to be something else.

Soon I found it: a few meager lines at the very bottom of the interface.

You've unblocked a Divine Avatar: Savior. Unlocking additional abilities requires 2000 pt. Light Karma.

Current abilities:

Righteous Fire

Deals 5,000 pt. damage, ignoring any of your opponent's magic and/or physical defenses. Distance weapon. Maximum range: 30 ft. Cooldown: 7 days

Transformation of Liquids

Allows the Avatar bearer to transform any available liquid into any other of his or her choice. Close-range ability requiring the user to touch the liquid-containing vessel. Cooldown: 1 day

Resurrection

Allows the Player to resurrect after a certain period of time. Cooldown: 30 days

Select the time and date of your next resurrection

I looked at the Resurrection bar which was currently at zero. That was interesting. Apparently, the ability arrived inactive. I inched the slider to the right; the first notch was marked “3 days”.

Excuse me? Why did it take so long? Never mind. The most important thing was, I could resurrect, no matter how crazy it sounded. Good enough.

Which meant that the Chorul had been right. I did indeed have a chance to make it. That also brought Janus’ motives into focus. The Destroyer’s Avatar must have given him some kind of defense imba ability while the Savior had the Righteous Fire and the Resurrection abilities, making him one of the most powerful gods — if not *the* most powerful.

There was another thing in favor of him owning Savior: it would allow him to neutralize the Righteous Fire which ignored the Destroyer God’s defenses. Probably. I might have to try and check it out.

Health 13/60

Health 12/60

The Darkest One wasn’t in a hurry to deal me a coup de grace. He was basking in the moment, talking non-stop. He probably hadn’t seen any of those movies where villains talk too much instead of getting their act together.

Very well. It looked like I might have to once again take control. I turned my head to Hunter and yelled,

“Run!”

My scream turned out truly blood-curdling, filled with desperate primal fear. No idea what my mentor must have read in my eyes but he got the message. He didn’t run, no, but he began to retreat fast without turning his back to the Darkest One.

Who apparently didn’t like it. The Two-Faced God shot up and darted toward me — and I was pretty sure he wasn’t going to ask about my health. He needed the sword which until now I’d managed to hold rather deftly in the wound with my stomach muscles, ignoring all the blood loss.

Which was exactly what I counted on.

As soon as his hand lay on the sword’s hilt, I grabbed at both with my bloodied hand, losing 4 pt. health in the process. My every movement was pure unadulterated agony. But the thing was, I grabbed this two-timing bastard so hard he had no hope of dodging. Then I activated Righteous Fire.

It was a terrible sight, I tell you. Under the gust of a fiery tornado, the god’s skin turned black and flaky like paper. His facial muscles went up like sulfur thrown on a bonfire. What meager layer of fat he’d had began to sizzle, boiling and evaporating.

It happened fast — way too fast. Before he’d had chance to cry out, Two-Face turned into a skeleton consumed by flames.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Two-Face. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained a Divine Avatar: Destroyer.

You’ve gained the Lability skill.

You’ve gained the Freeze spell.

Your fame has increased to 4.

Your reputation has changed to Badass.

This god, this superhuman, one of the greatest Players in history, had been reduced to a charred skeleton billowing thick clouds of steam and a sickly rancid stench. Gradually the skeleton began to crumble apart, turning to ashes which swiftly scattered in the wind.

Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to fully enjoy this nauseating scene.

It all happened too quickly and with no poetic hoo-ha. One moment the world was there; then it was gone. It was as if someone had switched off the lights and disabled all sounds and smells. Everything disappeared, me included: my body, my thoughts, my mind. The world had ceased to exist, and so had I.

* * *

Before I'd even opened my eyes, I knew it smelled of my childhood: a mixture of the warm wool used to knit socks and something old-fashioned but strangely pleasant, like the mothballs they used to keep in wardrobes. It brought back memories of mornings at my grandmother's whenever my parents left me at her place for the weekend. I'd wake up, run my hand over the wooly Turkmen carpet hanging on the wall, then I'd stretch and finally get up.

Mechanically my fingers reached out for its luxurious Oriental beauty. I cringed: the wall was bare and cold, no sign of the carpet at all. Which meant I wasn't eight years old anymore and this wasn't my grandma's place.

Where was I, then? I opened my eyes and took in my surroundings.

I was in a small room with a bed, a tiny table and a chair, dimly lit by a glass lantern with a tiny winged fluorescent creature fluttering inside.

I’d seen something like this before somewhere.

A vaguely familiar beastman was sitting on the chair, his figure emanating a grayish whisper of smoke. I willed the Divine Avatar away from my face and looked at Litius through my normal eyes.

“S-s-sergei, f-f-finally. Hunter d-d-did say you’d come round but he d-d-didn’t say w-w-when.”

“Calm down, Litius. It’s no good you rattling off like a machine gun,” I sat up and run my hand over the woolen blanket. That’s where the disorienting smell was coming from.

I had to think logically. The last thing I remembered was us being in Purgator, on our way to Virhort. If the messages I’d received were to be believed, The Darkest One — Janus the Two-Faced God — was now dead. My team had survived, however. Despite his wounded pride, Hunter had still been alive when I’d passed out — albeit slightly worse for wear — and judging by what he’d apparently told Litius about me coming round, he was still alive and kicking. Which meant that we must have made it to Virhort.

Next. I couldn’t speak for all of us, but I knew that Arts had only one friend here, the alchemist. Seeing as she’d gone to see him when she’d been wounded, it stood to reason that she must have beelined for him now as well. Which meant that he’d taken us in.

“Are we at Tartr’s place?” I asked.

“How d’you know?” Litius asked, so surprised that he’d even stopped stuttering.

“You’re not the only walking Pentium around here. I use my head occasionally too. So this is his place, then. Excellent.”

We fell silent. I used the pause to look into myself and check out the goodies that Two-Face had left me.

Divine Avatar: Destroyer

Activation requires under 1000 pt. karma

Now why didn’t that surprise me? You can’t sit on two chairs at once: you either need a very big backside or very strong furniture. Which wasn’t exactly my case. Actually, hadn’t the system offered me a change of development branch?

I rummaged through my interface about as far as I could reach but came up with nothing. Of course. Hadn’t it said that I had 24 hours to change my decision? And I’d been lying flat on my back for a good three days.

Very well, then. We were still the Time Master.

Lability (Agility): the increase in the body’s natural maneuverability as well as the speed of stimulation cycles in nervous and muscular tissues.

It wasn’t clear yet whether this ability was active or passive. Visually, nothing had changed. And physically? I definitely felt worse than I’d done before I’d died. If this was the result of their so-called Lability, I’d rather have had it as it was.

Freeze (Modification). Slows your opponent down 10% of their original speed. Range: 60 ft. Cost: 40 pt. mana. Duration: 5 sec. Can’t be used more than once on the same target.

Bah. I was pretty sure Two-Face must have had much stronger spells in his arsenal. What I’d got was garbage.

Wait a sec. I’d just answered my own conundrum. All the other spells must have been way out of my league. At my current level, I simply couldn’t use them. So they cut the coat according to the cloth. Which meant

I had to level up magic. Then next time I came across another suicide case like him, I might get myself a nice spell for my troubles.

I awoke from my reverie, noticing Litius' mouth opening and closing. "Sorry man, I got side-tracked. Could you repeat that, please? Where's everybody?"

"Arph is dead. Hunter killed him after Two-Face had taken control of his mind. At least that's what Hunter told me."

"I know that. I saw it myself. And where're all the others?"

"I see. Arts is at the Community governor's. Traug is with Vifeil, the commander of the Archali's fifth legion."

"It's not really a good time to go socializing. Not when your comrade is teetering between life and death…"

Litius hesitated. "You don't understand. They're not socializing. They're prisoners."

"No way!" I jumped to my feet and immediately regretted it. Firstly, my muscles had apparently decided that seeing as I was officially dead, they were on strike. And secondly, the room wasn't quite cut out to accommodate an average human, a bit like Korean minibuses. My head promptly hit the ceiling, forcing me back into a sitting position.

Tartr came running to check out the noise, followed by Bretta. The alchemist gave me a thorough check, a bit like a vet checks over a stray dog, nodding to himself all the while. He told me to stay seated and he'd be right back, then left again to delve deep into his lair. Bretta shuffled after him, bickering all the way.

In the meantime, I asked Litius to tell me what had happened.

It seems that the local chief had some kind of issue to settle with Arts. I immediately thought about the last time we'd been here when we'd been forced to escape two of their goons. And the worst thing was, Litius couldn't make it clear what the exact problem was. It looked like Arts owed something to the local Community governor. Although according to her, he simply had the hots for her. It was all highly dubious. Very much so.

With Traug, it was just as bad. Apparently, in the brief time between our two visits, the Archali had indeed summoned some gryphons and ejected the Kabirids from the fortress. Now the town of Virhort — or rather, the Commoners' part of it — was governed by one Vifeil, the commander of the Archali's fifth legion. No idea what kind of guy he was. Not only had he had the cheek to enter the Community grounds with his men, but he'd also had the audacity to arrest Traug and escort him away. According to Litius, Traug was now imprisoned in the fort's dungeon accused of smuggling Angels' Ashes. Which was also something I'd never heard of until now.

But the most surprising thing of all was Hunter's reaction. He seemed to have dropped my friends like a sack of rocks. Yes, you heard it right. Apparently, my mentor had just shrugged — like, shit happens, — and then he'd just ported back home. He'd come back once every day — in the evening, normally, — to ask about me, then he'd leave straight away.

So much for my dream team. Litius was the only one who'd kept vigil over my nearly dead body.

"Bummer," I summed it up. "Out of six of us who left for Purgator, one was killed, another one betrayed us, and two more were captured. I'm not much of a raid leader, am I?"

"Oh, and by the way," Litius offered me a handful of dust.

"What's that?"

“That’s all that Two-Face dropped. Nothing else. Hunter said that your fire had scorched his inventory with everything that was in it. Dust was the only thing that survived the blaze.”

I collected it. It was 206 grams. Together with what I already had, it made a total of 336 grams, enough for the remaining team to get back home. Now there was only one little problem left to solve: how to free my friends. It looked like Litius and I would have to do it between the two of us. Apparently, we couldn’t pin our hopes on Hunter. Talking about whom…

“Listen, Litius. What about the 200 grams of dust I paid Arph? Did he drop it when he died?”

“He did. Hunter took all his stuff and the dust too. He was the one who’d killed him, don’t forget.”

Now I really wanted to see Hunter and give him a piece of my mind. He'd taken all the loot and the dust, told us to fend for ourselves and just fled the coop. Don’t get me wrong, I did appreciate his visiting me and asking about my health. But as for all the rest…

I clambered to my feet and groaned in agony, feeling as if I was being disemboweled with a red-hot poker. I lifted the tatters of my sweater and gingerly touched the skin beneath. Jesus. You should have seen the scar. It was enormous, looking very much like a dry lump of mashed potato stuck to a clean plate. Not good. So much for their healing magic.

I checked my health indicator with some apprehension. My HP bar was fine — but my feelings told a different story. My Vigor was only half full and didn’t show any inclination to rise any time soon. How weird.

“Where’s the sword?” I asked, just to distract myself from all the pain.

“Which sword?”

I wasn’t in a state to suffer such sheer stupidity. Had Traug said that, I could have handled it, but Litius?

“Excalibur, of course. The one King Arthur received from the Lady of the Lake. Litius, put your brain in gear, please. Where’s Gramr?”

He shrugged. “It was destroyed by your fiery tornado. At least that’s what Hunter said.”

I wouldn’t say I was a pessimist, but now my mood had plummeted below zero. Gingerly I took my first step after my resurrection, leaning against the bed’s footboard. Apart from an unpleasant straining sensation in my belly, it was tolerable.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tartr said, reappearing in the room. “You need to stay in bed for at least another day. Here, take this.”

“What is it?” I asked, fiddling with a vial filled with a purple liquid.

“It’s exactly what you need right now. Drink it.”

Before, the old man hadn’t seemed to want to do me any harm. If you thought about it, he’d given me shelter and taken good care of me. In other words, he’d only been good to me. So I shrugged and emptied the vial in one swig. I wouldn’t say it made me feel better but my Vigor started inching up slowly. Better than nothing.

“Thanks a lot for your help, Tartr, but we need to be on our way.”

The alchemist shrugged. “As you wish. Although I recommend you stay in bed another two days.”

“Sorry, but we really should be going,” I smiled and made to leave the room but couldn’t because the short alchemist didn’t budge, blocking my way.

“Something else?” I asked, looking at him in surprise.

“Nothing, really,” he dismissed my question with the smile of an old friend. “Just a little payment for my services.”

“Your services?”

“It’s ninety grams. Thirty for the elixir and another sixty for the room. Twenty grams a day.”

What an old miser! At first, I didn’t even know what to say, but once I’d calmed down, I even admired his cheek. The man could squeeze water out of stone. $300 for some chemically colored water and a dark closet for the price of a five-star hotel? Okay. We hadn’t been born yesterday, either.

“Twenty grams a day? What, for this plank of a bed and a windowless closet?”

He gave me a frightened look. “Fifteen.”

“Ten,” I said, pinning him down with my glare. “And as for your elixir, I’m not entirely sure it helped me. I have a funny feeling it’s a fake.”

“Excuse me!” Tartr exploded in such sincere indignation that for a moment, I feared he might have a heart attack. “I’m one of the best alchemists in-”

“In the whole of Purgator?”

He paused, hesitant. “No. In Virhort.”

“All I want to say is that your elixir isn’t worth thirty grams,” I said conciliatorily. “Twenty sounds more like it.”

“Very well. Fifty grams in total.”

Your Bargaining skill has increased to level 3.

I nodded my good-bye to Bretta, then handed the money over to Tartr who very nearly danced for joy (were things really so bad here trade-wise?). Supported by Litius, I stumbled toward the exit with all the speed of a tortoise fresh out of the surgery room.

Litius opened the front door and helped me through it. I took in a lungful of fresh air and looked up at the patch of the clear sky high above, just visible through the hole in the mountain's sawn-off summit.

"W-w-what do we d-d-do now? W-w-where do you wanna g-g-go?"

"We're gonna rescue the others now. Where do I want to go? Well, for starters, it might not be a bad idea to pay the local governor a social visit."

Chapter 2

RUSSIANS LIKE TO JOKE that if you wake up and nothing's hurting, it means you're dead. So even if I had any reservations about the legitimacy of my post-resurrection existence, now they were completely dispelled. I was well and truly alive. Because a body just can't hurt so much in the afterlife.

All my limbs were aching like I'd just recovered from a long bout of fever. A nagging pain filled my freshly-decorated belly. My head was the only piece of good news. It was perfectly light and clear. I can't overestimate the benefits of dying for the purpose of clearing your mind and reloading your life. Highly recommended. Provided you're in possession of Savior's Avatar, of course. Otherwise, the consequences might not be quite so rosy.

And still, despite all my aches and pains, I somehow managed to hobble along. All on my own, without Litius' help. My body must have gradually realized that shirking wasn't an option and started to turn on.

For instance, all of a sudden I felt terribly hungry. As if to please, a wonderful smell of roasting wafted over the Community: some pork or bacon and potatoes. It took all of my willpower to walk past the tavern without choking on my own saliva. First, we had to find out what was really going on with both Arts and Traug.

The local governor lived in by far the biggest and weirdest house in the entire Community which really stood apart from all the other buildings. Not a house even, but rather a small palace or a really big mansion. Also, it seemed to be completely cut into a cliff which made it a natural continuation of the mountain. The wooden window frames couldn't open,

apparently made to last forever, glazed not with glass but with murky sheets of mica. I'd bet they let very little light inside. They must have hired a mason to decorate the stonework but he hadn't done a very good job of it, I'm afraid: all the "fancy" carvings could have been better done by a preschooler.

"This is limestone," Litius offered, thinking that I was trying to guess the type of stone. "Very similar to what you've got in Cesspit. Purgator is actually very similar to your world."

"With the exception of giant praying mantises and tiger goats."

The beastman shrugged. I took another look at the two-story building fashioned out of the mountain. The upstairs lights were on meaning that the owner was at home. No guards were posted outside.

I walked over and knocked hard and loud on the wooden door distressed by the weathering of time.

I had to wait for quite a while. Still, I showed no impatience: I could hear some activity within. Eventually, the door was answered. By whom? —— by my old "friend" Rock. No, not the actor neither the wrestler: it was one of the local Players who'd been chasing after Arts and myself the last time we'd been in Virhort. One of the governor's goons. Luckily, he didn't recognize me.

He looked me over. "What d'you want?" he asked gruffly.

"I need to see the governor."

"He's not seeing anyone. Come back tomorrow. Or the day after."

“I can’t. It’s urgent, I’m afraid. I’ve come to claim my reward for some rachnaids I killed.”

“Ah, that,” he drawled with obvious disappointment. “Wait here.”

He disappeared inside and reappeared after a few minutes. This time he swung the door wide open and nodded, motioning me inside. He cast an unwelcoming glance at Litius but didn’t say anything.

The governor’s house was really something else. His idea of interior design was as kitsch as they come, if you know what I mean. Greasy fake baroque armchairs edged with fringes and frilly fabrics; filthy curtains that must have been silk once; hardwood floors worn out in the areas of frequent passage; flaking gilded chandeliers and fancy candlesticks.

Just as I’d thought, the place was almost dark because of the lack of natural light. Despite the owner’s attempts to pull the wool over his visitors’ eyes, the result was completely the opposite: the place looked shabby and could only raise a feeling of pity and revulsion.

Judging by the noise, the life and soul of the house was to be found in the far room. That’s where Rock took us.

The sight which met me was anything but what you’d expect from an audience hall. If you disregarded the gaudy setting, it looked more like a cheap bar, judging by the state of the crowd.

Four men who’d have been better suited playing gangsters in a cheap TV series were sitting at a long table drinking, eating (or rather, stuffing their faces with their hands) and shouting. The house owner himself was sprawled across a high wooden armchair at the head of the table with his feet up.

???

Swashbuckler

???

???

You could compare the effect of our arrival with that of two clueless European tourists in Harlem. All conversation ceased; every jaw in the room stopped munching. Curiously, Litius got the lion's share of the attention, if you'll excuse the pun.

To my relief, the governor was the first to break the awkward silence. "I've been told you've sorted out the rachnaids. We'd have done it ourselves but we've got too much on our plate running this place."

I bit my tongue not to say anything I might later regret. Apparently, his idea of running the local Community was by arranging extended drinking sessions. On the other hand, there was an element of wisdom to it. If it ain't bust, don't fix it, 'cause you might only end up making it worse.

Actually, the governor gave me quite a good first impression. He was strong and amicable with smart, attentive eyes. Had it not been for his pushiness, I might have even liked him. "Might" being the operative word. I just couldn't forgive him for taking Arts prisoner.

"How many of you were there?" he asked.

"Counting me, six, Sachem."

Something in my answer seemed to have provoked great amusement among them. The whole room guffawed.

The governor smiled, too. "There are no such things as sachems in Purgator. Although what few communities we have here till preserve some kind of contact between each other, here it's every man for himself. Call me Pull. Enough shooting the breeze. I've still got a lot of things to do. Where's your piece of paper? The one with the mission?"

“I… I lost it.”

“Or most likely you never even had it. You’ve just wasted my time. Gaius, would you see the Player out? He got the wrong door.”

Rock started toward me and Litius. I had to speak quickly.

“In that case, the whole Community will know that Pull isn’t to be trusted. I know it’s not much but still it might have an effect on your reputation.”

“I’ve never had an agreement with you.”

“But others don’t know that. All they know is that you issued a mission. I completed it. If you need proof, I can always provide it.”

“Are you threatening me? I could swat you like a fly right here and now.”

“Try it,” I said, whipping out the knife and the Katzbalger. “One thing I can promise is that one of your men — or maybe even you — won’t leave this room alive. I already killed the rachnaid Queen, so a couple of you won’t be any problem.”

Realizing that things were about to kick off, Litius arched his feline back, preparing to leap. The governor’s goons jumped to their feet too, ready for a scrap. The sight of their swords, a long magic staff and a crossbow made me momentarily doubt my decision. Especially when the governor said in a quiet voice,

“Take him.”

It didn’t look like they were going to kill us. Not straight away, anyway, because a crossbow bolt hit me not in the head but in the leg, going right through it and shattering the bone.

Almost blinded by the excruciating pain, I still managed to do what was most important.

[∞]

The bolt clattered to the floor because I'd managed to dodge it just in time. Then I sensed a rather unpleasant burning sensation in my feet that kept growing until it felt as if I were standing on red-hot coals. Instinctively I jumped in the air — which turned out to be a very good idea because one of the goons had just decided to perform field brain surgery on me with his sword.

I was even considering counterattacking him when another goon hit me with the hilt of his sabre. What the hell was going on?

[∞]

I must have resembled a circus acrobat, constantly recoiling and leaping. I thrust my hand forward and cast Freeze, slowing down the goon whose fist was the closest to my face.

Your Modification skill has increased to level 1.

Admittedly, it wasn't exactly slo-mo, but it was sufficient for me to move out of their way and even whip behind the first guy's back: the one who'd wanted to amputate my legs. I grabbed his neck with my left hand; a professional might have done better but it was the best I could do.

I drew him toward me and brought my sword up to his Adam's apple. "Pull, you'd better call your men off before this place is a blood bath."

No idea where I'd got this reckless bravado from — but it's true that now I felt I was capable of anything. The death of the Darkest One had changed something within me, even though I was yet to fully realize it. The Time Master who was now standing before the Community's governor was a totally different person than Sergei the warehouse loader of a week ago.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 5.

You've reached level 7.

"Enough," the governor raised his hand. "Let Rouf go."

"First I want you to swear by the Game that you won't hurt either me or my friend."

Pull chuckled at his own thoughts. "I swear to you, the cheeky stranger who killed the rachnaid Queen, that I won't hurt either you or your filthy feline friend unless you attack first. This time."

I was about to correct him saying that Litius was anything but filthy, even though the beastman wasn't on his best behavior now. He was sitting on top of one of the bodyguards, pinning him down, baring his teeth in close proximity to the guy's neck. But before I could say anything, the governor was enveloped in a golden glow meaning that his oath had been accepted.

I shoved Rouf aside and took a couple of steps toward the exit, trying to get closer to Litius and prepared to retreat if absolutely necessary.

"I could pay you two hundred grams, I suppose, you cheeky bastard," the governor said, "and then you'd leave this place for good and never as much as mention my name to anyone again. And if you did, my men would find and kill you anywhere. If one day you ever decided to return to Virhort, you'd be killed too. And if…"

“I got it. If I as much as sneeze in the wrong direction, I’ll be dead,” I said. The adrenaline rush had begun to abate, taking my initial courage with it. Still, I was doing my best to keep up a front. “I don’t need your money. You’re keeping my friend prisoner. I’m prepared to forget your debt in exchange for her.”

Instead of just smiling or chuckling politely covering his mouth with his hand, the governor roared with laughter like a fully grown donkey. His goons — who’d only a moment ago had been quite prepared to rip me apart like a Jack Russel with a hot water bottle — followed suit.

“All the money in Purgator wouldn’t be enough to pay for Arts,” the governor replied, wiping away the tears. “And in a couple of days, she’ll be mine for good.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You see,” he said, his original smug manner returning to him, “there was this item that I needed. So I struck a deal with the beautiful Arts who promised she’d get it for me. And what do I see? The deadline for the contract — which is the beginning of a new cycle of the Blue Moon — is only a two days away, and she’s done zilch!”

“How do you expect her to procure the item if you’re keeping her locked up?”

“I’d have loved to let her go. Provided she swore an oath that she’d be back before the deadline. But no, our princess is much too proud… or stupid. That’s why I have to keep her under lock and key, just to save myself the trouble of having to look for her.”

‘Does it matter who procures the item?”

He gave me a long look. “What do you mean?”

“If I bring what you’re looking for, would you let her go?”

‘Oh,” he paused, pensive. “Can’t see why not. If you bring me the item I need before the start of the new Blue Moon cycle, sure I’ll let her go. Otherwise I’ll take your pussycat,” he pointed at Litius. “I’d say that was fair enough.”

My mouth went dry. I tried not to look at Litius who indeed resembled a bedraggled cornered beast. The worst part about it was, I had no choice now. I couldn’t renege on my promise.

“What exactly are you looking for?”

“The Elixir of Power. Jumping Jack’s got it. If you bring it within two days, you can pick up both your friends. If you decide to flee the coup or don’t fulfil your part of the bargain, then…” he made a helpless gesture.

“Very well. Come on, Litius, let’s go.”

“Oh no,” the governor raised a warning finger, “your pussycat will stay here with us. I swear I’ll treat him like a human being while you’re away. He will come to no harm.”

Another golden flash sealed his oath.

“…But once your time has run out, my hands will be free as far as your friends are concerned. Now just go. We have nothing more to say.”

He made a sign to Rock who walked over to me and started ejecting me from the room. There was nothing more I could do but obey and leave.

Once outside, I perched myself on the front steps, shaking with nerves, anger and moral fatigue. Oh great. I was a real master negotiator, wasn’t I? I’d entered his house with the only creature that could have helped me and ended up leaving him hostage.

Still, just sitting here was pretty stupid, wasn't it? I got up and staggered down to the local tavern. Crude plank tables and chairs, a Purg waiter and a small bulletin board by the bar with a few missions posted on it.

For three grams of dust, I ordered a plate of fried pork and onions and a beer. Once it had arrived, I attacked the fragrant meat with gusto and polished it off in five minutes flat. This I regretted immediately as a sharp pain shot through my stomach. I shouldn't have overtaxed my system. Deciding that it couldn't possibly get any worse, I continued to sip the beer, thinking.

I'd had a strange presentiment that had it been so easy, Arts would have already procured said elixir for that schmuck. The fact that she hadn't done so meant that there was some kind of complication. Having said that, there was one thing I didn't know about contracts here. Were they as binding as oaths, or could they be broken? Because if they could, nothing prevented that asshole from taking the elixir from me only to send me off to feed the antelope. Not by hand, you understand, but as fodder.

Alternatively, that might allow me to disregard the contract too. But in that case, how was I supposed to liberate Arts and Litius? That was the $64,000 question.

The best thinking strategy is pretend you're busy doing something else. That way the right answer just pops up automatically. Which was why I opened my interface.

The good news was, the rachnaid Queen's clutch of eggs was still there. Which meant I potentially had some capital. All I had to do was find someone to sell them to.

Also, hadn't they said something about me receiving a new level?

Available points: 3

Strength: 26 (x)

Intellect: 18 (x)

Fortitude: 20 (x2)

Agility: 24 (x2)

Stamina: 18 (x3)

Rhetoric: 15 (x3)

Speed: 16

That was a no-brainer. Rhetoric and Stamina, of course. On one hand, they weren't really the right attributes for the job. But what could I do? I seemed to be constantly leveling up the wrong skills.

The last available point got me thinking. Both my knife and my Katzbalger were technically short-bladed weapons. Which meant that Agility would level up in synch with them. But Stamina wasn't quite so clear-cut. Let's invest it in that.

Actually, two important things had also happened. My Vigor had stopped at 60 pt. which was twice as much as I'd started with. I might be able to level up Athletics now, why not? Secondly, the number of available charges had grown to 36. And once I'd reached level 10 which was already almost within sight, I could lower the number of cooldown points, too. Which would allow me four consecutive attempts at rewinding time.

No, no, no, that's not what I should be thinking about. I still needed to find out about Traug. Only this time, I'd have to change my visiting strategy. I shouldn't be barging in trying to dictate my own terms but show a little more humility.

My train of thought was broken by a glimpse of a familiar puny figure by the tavern door. Tartr walked in, approached the Purg behind the bar and started unloading all sorts of vials on the counter. The orange-skinned bartender studied everything fastidiously, then measured out some dust — a rather small amount, actually. Now I understood why this hobbit had been so happy to clean me out.

“Tartr?” I called in a low voice.

The alchemist turned round and gave me a friendly nod. Yeah right. With friends like these, who needs enemies? Even if I’d died, he’d have found a way to send me the bill. Now, too, he matter-of-factly sat at my table and cast a sideways glance at my beer mug, forcing me to ask for another mug and treat him.

“Where’s your friend?” he asked, taking a sip.

“Off on his own business. Listen, you don’t happen to know a guy called Jumping Jack?”

He choked on his beer, exploding in a bout of coughing. I thumped him on his back. When he’d finally caught his breath, he gave me a reproachful look. Like, *‘you should have warned me first’*.

“What do you want with hm?” he asked.

“I need to find him. He’s got something I need.”

He laughed. “In that case, I don’t envy you. You’re not the first person who tried to rip off Jumping Jack. None of them have ever been seen since.”

“Please expand. Who the hell is he, anyway?”

“Jumping Jack is the most famous alchemist around here,” Tartr’s voice filled with equal doses of admiration and jealousy. “And he’s not the

worst among the wizards, either. He used to live here during the time of the old governor."

"An alchemist? Not your mentor, by any chance?"

"No," he said, crestfallen. "He was the mentor of my mentor. As for me…" he hesitated, apparently unsure whether to tell me the whole story. "He didn't accept me. He said I had no aptitude for alchemy. Said I'd be able to keep a shop but that I'd never make a brilliant researcher."

"What else do you know about him?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Everyone thought he was the next candidate for governor. He was well respected in the Community…"

"What happened, then?"

"Pull and his goons, that's what happened. The bastard put two and two together and started creating problems for Jack. He wanted to make him leave the Community. Apparently, he even tried to kill him. So Jack just left. He went into the mountains," Tartr pointed out of the window, "and had all his stuff moved there: all his furniture, the chemicals, glassware, all the books and equipment. That's where he lives now. Whoever tries to approach his cave has a death wish. It's absolutely laden with traps."

"So stealing an elixir from him wouldn't be viable? Is that what you're saying?"

He shook his head. "Impossible. No amount of cunning or crude force can do that. You have a better chance of seeing a *pantherfen* dance under the Blue Moon."

I didn't want to inquire about the meaning of this particular expression. There were more important things to ask him about. "Does that mean that Pull and Jumping Jack are not the best of friends?"

“They never were the best of friends, but now you just can’t imagine the degree of animosity between them.”

“Excellent,” I said, easing myself away from the table. ‘This is simply wonderful. At least now I understand what I have to do.”

Chapter 3

IF ONE PARTICULAR cartoon theme song were to be believed[1], morning was the best time for visiting your friends. I couldn't quite follow its sage advice, seeing as it was already afternoon, but it looked like I might have to visit Virhort's top fortress anyway.

Perched on the side of the mountain, the stronghold overhung the city. From a distance, it appeared tiny like a child's toy — but as I approached, I was able to appreciate its quite impressive size. Massive round towers, tall walls and a sturdy squat donjon: the best way to storm the citadel was definitely from the air. Troops just couldn't approach it via the narrow road lined with smooth sheer cliffs on one side — clearly the work of master stonemasons — and a precipitous drop on the other.

Two Archali — a girl and a young man — guarded the main gates. Even though I'd never been religious, I couldn't but appreciate the sheer beauty of their species: their exalted features, the tall bodies and most importantly, their neat, swan-like wings. They stood there like the epitome of Yin and Yang. Their shitty attitudes were the only departure from the traditional angelic norm. Which one of them didn't hesitate to demonstrate right away.

"Good morning," I said boldly. "I'd like to see Commander Vifeil, please."

"The audience hours of the Hierarch Vifeil, Standard Bearer and Commander of the Fifth Legion of the Holy Host of the Archali, have already ended," the angelic young man announced with a stone face.

I got so lost listening to him that it took me some time to grasp the meaning of what he'd just said. So I couldn't see the Commander today. Which unfortunately didn't agree with my own plans.

“The thing is, I’m not seeking an audience,” I said. “This isn’t a private matter. Vifeil has arrested my friends. I would like to know why.”

“The audience hours of Hierarch Vifeil, Standard Bearer and-”

“Oh, do shut up, Aryil,” the girl angel said. “You could ask the paladins about it. Our holy brothers in arms might know the reason.”

“But we still can’t let you in,” the young man said with a hint of a smirk. “If you give me the paladin’s name, we might go and get him. All we need is the name of one of the seven paladins serving under Hierarch Vifeil, Commander of the Fifth Legion of the Holy Host of the Archa-”

“I got it,” I hurried to say, trying to remember the name and rank of the female Archalus I’d met only recently. “In that case, could I please speak to Ilya, the Captain of the Second Company of the Fifth Legion?”

To say I’d cut him down to size would be an understatement. The young man’s face fell, like that of a little boy who’d been mistakenly given the wrong Christmas present and then asked for it back.

The girl beamed, however, and all but flapped her wings with joy. “Do you know Ilya? I could get her. What do I say?”

“Just tell her I’m a friend of Arts’. She’ll know.”

The next ten minutes the guard and I spent in each other’s silent company. I can’t say we did anything productive. The guard did his best stone-faced impersonation of a Kremlin sentry, pretending I wasn’t even there. Very well. No skin off my nose. He wasn’t at the top of the pile he thought he was. According to my Insight, he wasn’t even a Player. Apparently, the local commoners were more than happy to invite themselves to the Seekers’ Community. Why not? If you were lucky enough to kill a Kabirid or if you happened to be around when an Archalus died, you had every chance of becoming a Seeker yourself, inheriting their skills.

The question was, how did they do it? If my memory served me correctly, a commoner couldn't even enter a Players' Community.

"Not you again?" Ilya said behind me.

I turned round. The Archali captain looked… how can I say it… she looked divine. Her light translucent robes didn't make her look like a shapeless old hag; on the contrary, they seemed to highlight her shapely figure. Apparently, she was one of those women who eschewed bras, which was why it took me a while to remember what I was about to say. She must have noticed my inability to conduct a constructive discussion because she folded her wings and wrapped herself in her scarlet satin cloak.

"I need to talk to you about a rather sensitive business," I said in a hushed voice to make her understand I needed to speak to her in private.

We moved some distance away from the guards. The Archalus girl kept craning her neck and hushing the other guard up who was trying to talk to her. She was clearly more interested in what we had to say rather than what he did. I took Ilya even further away, just in case.

"You have my friend. Traug."

"What, that Korl smuggler? As soon as the commandant brings the garrison back, he'll be doing a little digging down the mines."

"From what I hear, he's being accused of stealing Angels' Ashes, whatever that's supposed to mean."

"Well, that's simple. When Players die, they leave nothing behind. But when Archalus commoners die, they gradually decay, releasing what we call ashes. This friend of yours broke into our crypts and desecrated them. And not only here in Purgator, but also in Elysium."

Aha. That's probably why his Karma was still light. Apparently, it only reflected what was good for your business, not for your soul.

“That’s truly awful,” I said. “I understand it. But what would be the point sending one dumbass Korl down the mines? You wouldn’t happen to know of any way to get him out, would you? I would be greatly indebted to you.”

She gave me a long appraising look, chewing her lower lip in thought. “I can see that you’ve somehow managed to join the Light since we last met. Otherwise I wouldn’t have even given you the time of day. But now… honestly, I’ve no idea if you can save your buddy. Although the accusations he’s facing aren’t punishable by death, they’re still quite serious. We’ll have to speak to the commander.”

“Yeah yeah. Hierarch Vifeil, Standard Bearer and Commander of the Fifth Legion of the Holy Host of the Archali,” I finished her phrase for her.

She shrugged. “I just call him Vif.”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to ask you about. They told me to come tomorrow. But unfortunately, time is an issue.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Very well. Follow me, Lightie.”

She turned round and headed for the gates. When she approached the guards, she nodded at me to say I was no longer a persona non grata.

The guards stepped aside. I walked past them and found myself in an inner court crowded with outhouses. A huge stable housed several of what must have been gryphons: giant beasts with eagles’ heads, clawed front paws, and horses’ posteriors. The only difference being, they were almost twice as big as any horse. The only other thing that gave away their kinship with horses was their smell which really prevented me from taking in a good lungful. The place was bustling with Archali busy both walking and flying around, who didn’t seem to be fazed by the smell at all — looking at them, you’d think the place was filled with frankincense.

“There’re not many Players among them, are there?” I remarked to Ilya, looking at the angels.

“The legion is still young. Most of them are newbs. They've not yet had the chance to become Seekers. Many of them are yet to kill their first Kabirid.”

“Actually, what happens to a commoner who does kill a demon? No, I understand the technicalities of it — but don’t they gain the victim’s development branch? Or even a couple of demonic abilities and spells?”

Ilya shrugged. “Even evil can serve the common good.”

“And you are the common good, I take it?”

The glare she gave me made it perfectly clear that another couple of indiscretions like that might earn me an almighty kick in the butt that might send me flying right across the city with no wings to help. So I bit my tongue and kept my wisecracks to myself.

The sentries posted by the donjon proved much more impressive than the ones by the community gates. All of them were veteran Players, their bodies covered in scars, their glares promising nothing good. And as I was about to find out, had it not been for my Light karma, they wouldn’t have even bothered with me.

“Who’s that Lightie?” asked an Archalus with the tag that read *Exterminator* over his head. As far as I could make out, this was his reputation. Not the best thing to have, if you asked me.

“He’s a supplicant.”

“Visiting hours are over,” another guard said.

“This is a special case.”

I expected them to launch a barrage of objections and was actually quite prepared to kick a few butts, readying myself to rewind time at a moment's notice. Still, Ilya's words proved to be enough for them. Her rank must have had a lot to do with it.

One of the guards — apparently the one in charge — asked us to wait and disappeared inside. Soon he returned and nodded to Ilya.

The donjon turned out to be tiny inside. Two staircases ascended either side of the front door. Ignoring them, we walked straight ahead toward a reception hall which was admittedly small — about six hundred square feet or so. Its walls were hung with tapestries depicting battles between the Archali and the Kabirids, the latter being portrayed as cowardly and cowering on the ground while the victorious Elysians flew at them sword in hand, their wings outspread. Only the farthest and the humblest of the tapestries had a rather peaceful theme, depicting a half-naked Archalus with a sword in one hand, pressing an angelic baby Archalus to his chest.

Several creatures were sitting on stone benches the sheer sight of which was enough to give you hemorrhoids. I was quite surprised to see two human Players, three Purgs and an Abbas. Vifeil himself was perched on a low stool nearby.

My first impression of him was that of fear. The guy was huge. Compared to all the others, he looked like a young Schwarzenegger next to Iggy Pop. With a fresh scar on his cheek and a singed right wing, he seemed to be a force of nature temporarily dormant, one that would send everyone fleeing in awe the moment it awoke from its slumber.

The tag above his head read *Demon Slayer,* adding to my discomfort.

"What's up, Ilya?" his voice thundered like an avalanche rolling down a mountain.

“This Player really wants to speak with you. It’s about one of the prisoners.”

“A half-blood Korl,” he frowned. “Somehow I don’t think you’ve brought me the ransom for one of those Purg turntails.”

“You’re right. I haven’t come here to ask for any of them,” my voice sounded like a teenage falsetto after his deep dark voice. I cleared my throat and went on, “You’ve got my friend Traug.”

“That grave robber is one of your friends?” Vifeil knit his chiseled eyebrows. “Don’t you humans have a saying, something like *‘show me your friends and I’ll tell you who you are’*?”

“Oh no, no, I’m not into that kind of thing at all,” I hastened to reassure the angry giant. “The fact that he used to earn his living doing this was a huge surprise to me. As far as I know, he’s been leading a quiet life in Cesspit for quite a while.”

“A crime against the Archali has no statute of limitations,” he snapped. “A grave robber should rot in hard labor.”

Just look at this Batman among angels! Still, I had to push on, otherwise Traug’s number would be up. “If I offered you some dust, could we just forget this entire episode, maybe?”

“What?” he jumped to his feet. “You’ve insulted me twice now! First, when you called the desecration of my friends’ graves an ‘episode’, and second, when you thought you could just buy me off with some dust and forget about it!”

Dammit! I’d truly put my foot in it, hadn’t I? Wording, it’s all in the wording. By saying the same thing differently, you could get different reactions, triggering agreement instead of anger. Right, let’s give it a try.

[∞]

"…a grave robber should rot in hard labor."

"I join you in mourning the desecration of your comrades' graves. This is a highly condemnable behavior for any of my kind. Which is exactly why I'm here. If there is any way, however small, of righting the wrongs that Traug has committed, please let me know, and I'll do everything possible to make sure you don't judge all Korls by one wayward soul."

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 7.

Vifeil zoned out, dumbfounded. There was no telling what he was thinking. He could earn big money playing poker with a face like that.

"What do you think, Grassem?" the commander finally asked.

"I'm afraid, this half-blood is being economical with the truth in regards to condemnable behavior, Hierarch," the Abbas rose from the bench, twitching the black growths on his head. "Although in their society the desecration of graves is indeed a reprehensible deed, he doesn't really care what you think about his species. He is, however, quite prepared to do everything he can in order to save his friend."

Dammit! I'd completely forgotten that the Abbases could tell the truth from a lie. But wait a second! If I'd received a new level in Persuasion, it meant that I'd done everything right.

Before I could even grasp the entire gist of it, the commander confirmed my theory.

"Well," he said pensively. His face had cleared. He didn't look so angry anymore. "I can see now that you're indeed a real Lightie. You've come to me to rescue that shithead friend of yours. And I'm quite prepared

to make a few concessions. There's something that just might help me close my eyes to some of the crimes committed by..."

"By Traug," the nearest Archalus prompted.

"What do I need to do?" I asked, listening intently.

"The Kabirids use Angels' Ashes for making potions against us. But we have a couple of tricks of our own, too. Our alchemists are very advanced in the making of anti-demonic potions. But they all require sulfur from Hell. Ten grams might be enough for them to continue their experiments. If you fetch it, I'll set your friend free."

"Very well. I'll get it done."

That was the end of the hearing. Without saying a word, Ilya took me out. As I left the donjon, I could literally feel all the curious stares upon me.

Ilya only spoke when we'd finally reached the gates. "It seems that this Korl is very dear to you. Otherwise there would have been no reason for you to take on this suicide mission."

"A suicide mission?"

"Exactly. After a good battle, we only manage to collect twenty to thirty grams of Devil's Sulfur from all the dead Kabirids. Because as you can imagine, not all of them have it on them. But we're legion. And you're alone."

"Not completely," I smiled and went back down the hill.

I did have a trump card up my sleeve. A very big trump card capable of becoming invisible. A super stealth rogue, if you know what I mean. I had a funny feeling that Hunter could help me out a lot. He already could have: we could have forced our way to the governor where Hunter would

have made mincemeat out of the guards while I sorted out the governor himself. Easy.

Still, Hunter surprised me quite unpleasantly. He arrived just before sunset. By then, I'd spent some quality time scurrying around the city and especially the community. I'd found a blacksmith and left the Katzbalger with him, which cost me only twelve grams of dust. I tried not to convert this into rubles so as not to give myself a heart attack. But at least he'd promised to repair the sword before tomorrow lunchtime.

I'd also spent some time watching the governor's house. Apparently, his goons sometimes actually did perform their duties. Admittedly inebriated, they patrolled the Community, either pestering the newbs or hassling the locals for no particular reason. But after being given a couple of grams of dust, the chivalrous upholders of the law continued on their way.

The fact that his sidekicks were pure unadulterated filth was bad news, of course. The good news was, it left him for about ten minutes with only three bodyguards. Four against two wasn't going to be easy, but I had Hunter, didn't I?

At least that's what I thought until I told the whole thing to my mentor.

"No," he said.

"No what?"

"It's got nothing to do with us."

"What do you mean, it's got nothing to do with us? They've got Arts! And Litius! And we need to rescue Traug too!

"Their problems shouldn't be yours!" Hunter said in such a loud voice that even Tartr and Bretta busy squabbling in the far room fell silent.

“They got themselves into this mess, let them get themselves out of it.”

“But Litius, it’s only because of me that he… And Arts, you should have heard her talk about you, she literally pisses herself with admiration. When you asked her to get her backside to Purgator to help me out, she didn’t hesitate for one second!”

He waved my arguments away. “I paid her to do that. That’s the extent of our relationship. I want you to remember one thing. Charitable people don’t live long here. You have your own life, so you’d better take care of that. The rest is none of your business.”

“No, but-”

“Enough!” he snapped. “If you stop all this bullshit, at least you’ll live longer than…”

“Than who?”

“Than my o-...” his voice quivered, “than my own sons. Get yourself ready now. The Magister is very worried. And not just him: all the Empaths are on edge. Something’s in the air. And it doesn’t bode well, I’m afraid. I’ll just pop out to see the caster, and we’ll go straight home. Is that clear?”

I clenched my teeth and nodded.

Hunter gave me a long suspicious look and left.

I could understand him. He was worried about me. Normal. But dumping my friends? Logically thinking, what he’d said made perfect sense. Arts had taken up this mission of her own free will, and she’d failed it. Traug was a grave robber who deserved the punishment. I had no arguments against it. But Litius? The poor beastman who’d fallen victim to my own stupidity and half-assed attempt at diplomacy. I just couldn’t abandon him to his fate.

And that’s logically thinking. Unfortunately, I’d been raised reading good old-fashioned books for kids where friendship was much more than just a mere word. I used to have my fair share of casual friends and classmates who eventually went their own ways. Only now that I’d got access to the Game had I finally found people I could call true friends and comrades. I just couldn’t dump them.

I knocked on the door of the alchemist’s room. “Tartr? Can I speak to you for a second?”

“What’s up?”

“Take this. There’s ten grams here,” I handed him the dust. “When Hunter comes back, tell him I left. Not a word more. When I’m back, you’ll get another ten grams. Okay?”

Your Bribery skill has increased to level 1.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” he said, deftly pocketing the money.

“And one other thing. Could you give me some idea where to look for Jumping Jack’s cave?”

Chapter 4

SILENT NIGHT, PURGATOR NIGHT... all is calm and all is bright... Never mind the sky was totally different here. No sign of our familiar constellations: I couldn’t even find the Pole Star or the two Ursas, let alone Sagittarius, Libra or Canis Major. Everything here was totally different, apart from the waxing Blue Moon which was doing its best to resemble our own.

Apparently, Saturn had those two funny satellites which every few years would have a little dance, trying to chase each other while moving in their respective orbits until, obeying the laws of gravity, they would swap places with each other. The even funnier thing was, one of the two satellites was called Janus.

Could it be something similar here? Could these two satellites eventually change places too? The way they reflected the light of the local star could then affect all living organisms. Like the blue light could make Players stronger while the red one could empower all sorts of monsters and other creatures. Having said that, had I created this place myself, I would have just explained it all away as *“magic!”*.

To tell you the truth, I didn’t really feel the effects of the blue moon. It was already a good job it lit up my way, thank you very much.

Jumping Jack lived to the west from the old dilapidated Gate in the mountains. I was afraid I might miss it, but Tartr had assured me that it was impossible. According to him, if I kept moving in the right direction, I’d all but walk right into it.

Okay. If he says so. Until now though, I’d come across nothing but antalopes. A small herd of them had frozen on a nearby hill, watching my every step. What was even worse, it had taken me some time to notice them, too busy pondering the finer points of the local astronomy.

Once I’d noticed them, I stopped dead in my tracks. They were barely thirty yards away — a mere trifle for them.

I drew the knife, utterly regretting not having brought my Katzbalger along. Even rusty and less efficient damage-wise, but it was still better than nothing. Especially against nine head of fully grown cattle.

Not nine, sorry. Eleven head. Another couple had just wandered out from behind the hill, apparently wondering what the others were lining up for.

All I had was three time rewinds and four spells — and I had no idea which one of them could actually help me. Plus a small herd of antalopes was moving slowly toward me step by step, lowering their horned tiger’s heads. I really needed to disrupt their well-laid-out plans of killing me by adding a dash of unpredictability. Meaning, I had to attack first.

An electric arc split the night in two, zeroing in on its target. The antalope closest to me — apparently more known for his valor than his brains — flew backwards, flattening two more of his brethren on the way and forcing all the others to turn tail. The whole herd retreated with a fearful meowing just like a disturbed bunch of alley cats.

In the meantime, I stood with my arm still extended, attempting to read a new system message while simultaneously trying to figure out what to do next:

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 3.

I shuffled from foot to foot, uncertain about how to proceed. The antalopes were hot-footing it like the Napoleonic army retreating from Moscow in 1812, without as much as looking back. Even the two trampled ones had promptly regained their senses and legged it, leaving behind the sole poor creature which had played the role of a lightning rod.

How weird. The Electric Arc only had 40 pt. damage. How could I have possibly killed the antalope with it?

I walked over to him. He looked even bigger up close. He was in fact as large as a fully grown cow albeit his flanks were slightly narrower. His chest was heaving. You couldn't really kill him quite so easily.

I warily touched his horns. They weren't that sharp: I wouldn't say they'd been used a lot for fighting. Still, one poke with these horns wouldn't make you come for more.

I took a better look. The tiny red strip of an HP bar was hovering above his head. The creature hadn't had it before. According to it, I must have somehow stripped him of 2/3 life. So! Either antalopes only had 60 HP like myself, or…

I looked up and slapped my forehead. Of course! The Red Moon boosted all monsters and wild creatures while the Blue Moon boosted Players, didn't it? I must have simply gotten my share of its magic.

In the meantime, the antalope opened his eyes, staring at me blearily. His legs began to convulse.

I leapt aside and drew my knife but he had no intention of attacking me. He scrambled to his feet and attempted to trot away, staggering. I watched him wobble away, having absolutely no intention of chasing after him.

So my every action would now get a Blue Moon boost. It was probably perfect timing to have a few sparring sessions with Hunter, somewhere in an open field at night. Still, he was probably furious now; I had a funny feeling I might have to postpone my training with him until better days.

Still, it gave me an idea. I could still do some spell leveling, couldn't I? And the more effective the spells, the faster I could level them. Had some

unsuspecting commoner happened to be around now, I could have used them to practice Smoke and Mirrors. I could also use antalopes in order to level up Freeze. Shame they were all gone now.

But as for Light and Electric Arc, I didn't need anyone in order to level them, did I? What's more, I had everything I needed for leveling Light, namely darkness which, as the saying goes, is young people's friend. Neither Illusions nor Rhetoric were of any use to me. But Destruction was another thing. All I had to do was find a suitable target. It wasn't for nothing that Rumis had mannequins in his shop. I needed to find something of the kind too.

After about three minutes, I came across what looked like a suitable target: a big branchy bush. I got to within ten paces of it, reached out my hand and cast Electric Arc.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 4.

In an ideal world, they should have also awarded me level 1 in Pyromania. The bush went up in flames, dispelling the dark of the night. Instinctively, without even realizing what I was doing, I ripped off my trench coat and started putting out the fire. The last thing I wanted was to start a wildfire.

Finally, I put the now-dirty trench coat stained with soot back on and shook my head. This wasn't the right way to do it. I needed to make sure that my shooting practice was done in a more environmentally-friendly way.

Which was why my next target was a withered tree stump in a small grove of trees nearby. I'd had to make a small detour to get to it, because there was nothing suitable other than grass and rocks on my way. My mana had already restored to 82 pt., making it enough for two casts.

Let's do it!

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 5.

The stump split in two as if hit with a hatchet. An uneven crack formed right across it.

Let’s try that again!

My next attempt, however, was a bitter disappointment because absolutely nothing happened. Sure the stump splintered, but the system wasn’t in a hurry to reward me with a new level. That’s how I came to realize the most important aspect of it: in order to level up a skill, the complexity of the task had to increase.

I remembered that during my last training sessions with Hunter, my Short Blades skill had only improved one level at a time, two at the most. And that’s after two hours of really going at it. At the same time, my five-minute battle with the rachnaids had garnered me quite a few brownie points. Which meant that this Game system was just like the human body: if you kept putting it under the same load, it would quickly get used to it. Your muscles know perfectly well what amount of exertion they need for a particular task, so in order to achieve the result you want, you need to constantly change your level of training.

The main thing was, I understood this principle now. From this moment on, the remaining journey had ceased to become a drudgery, turning into an exciting quest. First I had to wait until my mana had restored enough to cast a spell. After that, I started looking for suitable targets to practice my destructive magic abilities: old branches, cracked rocks that could be split in two, even some of the bigger tree roots. I came across a couple of bushes but I prudently left them alone.

From time to time, I came across various animals. Some of them ran off straight away just like the antalopes had, while others kept a watchful eye on my progress, like some giant yellow-feathered birds. Still, I chose the route of non-aggression, so now I’m awaiting a letter from Greenpeace inviting me to become an honorary member of their organization.

As a result, I managed to level up Destruction very nicely. Hardly surprising: you don't need much brain matter to destroy something. So I wasn't too surprised when I received another system message after splitting a lump of rock:

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Destruction

Mastery level: 1

You can now select advanced spell settings

I scanned through the list, found Electricity and selected it.

+10% to damage dealt by all Electricity spells

Much better. Now my Electric Arc had 44 pts. damage instead of 40. Nothing to write home about, but still it considerably raised my chances of success.

I looked at the glittering bits of crumbled crystal at my feet. So that's what Tartr had been talking about. I started scratching around and soon found another crystal about twenty paces away. Very well, Hänsel, let's go look for Gretel.

Tartr had been right. Jumping Jack hadn't even bothered to camouflage his cave properly: a few cliffs were all that concealed it from prying eyes. All you had to do was go around the cliffs to see the entrance into a dungeon.

Still, I wasn't in a hurry to invite myself in. The cave's walls were plastered in runes whose meanings I couldn't even begin to fathom out. What was it again Tartr had said about Jack being not only an alchemist but also a wizard? What was it now?

“Jumping Jack? Er… excuse me, sir? Mr. Jumping Jack?”

A weak echo was my only answer. Apparently, this Mr. Jack was a rather inhospitable guy. Or maybe he just wasn’t at home. Which would make things a lot easier, of course: anyone could walk in and take whatever they wanted. Provided you still had hands to take it with.

I unhurriedly approached the entrance and studied the runes. They seemed okay. Gingerly I began to climb inside, pressing my back against the wall without taking my eyes off the rune-painted stones.

Big mistake. I slipped on a smooth round stone. My foot slid down a small crack between the rocks. I heard a click.

I wailed in agony like a dog who’d thought he was being taken to sire a bitch and instead ended up on the vet’s table. Not the most pleasant of sensations. They must have planted some kind of trap there.

Oh no, sir, two can play at that game.

[∞]

It looked like sneaking in wasn’t an option. Very well. Let’s try another approach and walk straight in.

I headed confidently into the cave, openly and without fear. Still, I regretted it before I’d even gone fifteen feet.

One of the runes lit up. Something pinned me to the ground; I felt like an astronaut back on Earth, the only difference being that the pressure kept on growing. My veins bulged; I struggled to breath. My joints started crunching, followed by my very bones. I decided not to hang around to see how it all might end.

[∞]

It looked like the mountain wasn’t in the mood to go to Mohammed. Nor did it show much appreciation when said prophet tried to approach it himself. What could I do? Only besiege it and starve ‘em out.

To tell you the truth, I was getting hungry myself. I’d had dinner ages ago. Still, going back wasn’t on the cards. I only had two days or even less to liberate my friends. And Jumping Jack seemed to be the only person who could help me with that.

I sat myself down on the ground not far from the cave and watched the entrance. Eventually I leaned my back against the cliff shielding the cave from unwanted stares and dozed off.

When I woke up, the sky was already lighter. I climbed back to my feet and stepped aside to take a leak. I was desperate for a wash. They say that deadmen don’t sweat but I’d already been alive for two days. The fact that I’d also lost my socks and boxers which had dematerialized during my last teleport to Purgator — sorry for this intimate detail — didn’t make me feel any better. My feet were all sweaty and covered in blisters which hindered my every step. The lack of my undies added a certain degree of discomfort too.

I walked back to my place, contemplating my first purchase once I got back home: several sets of socks and underwear. Actually, I’d already noticed that short socks weren’t the best thing to wear with high boots. I might have to discuss it with Hunter once he calmed down a bit and could speak to me without resorting to a four-letter vocabulary.

“What do you want, Seeker?” a loud voice shouted from the cave.

I got back to my feet, stretching my numb back, and peered into the dark. Jumping Jack showed no intention of leaving the cave. I, however, made a perfect target out in the open. If he wanted to kill me, all he had to

do was cast a spell. Even my time rewind wouldn’t save me from a crossbow bolt: I simply wouldn’t be able to dodge it in time.

So the fact that the cave dweller hadn’t attacked me yet was actually good news. This time, I did everything by the book: instead of barging straight in, I “knocked” and sat by the door waiting for it to be answered.

But first, I’d rewound time again.

“I’m looking for Jumping Jack.”

“You’ve found him. And?”

“I need to speak to you and-”

“Speak up,” he interrupted me again.

So much for constructive dialog. Still, I’d already understood the main point: this wasn’t the right situation to beat about the bush or have a rhetoric match. So I’d chosen an entirely different tactic.

“I’ve been sent to you to get the Elixir of Power.”

“You wanted to say, ‘steal the Elixir of Power’. In which case you can get lost.”

“Won’t you ask me who sent me here?”

“As if I don’t know. It’s that Pull, the dimwit. No idea why you’re telling me all this but I’d really get out of here while you’re still alive.”

“I want to kill Pull,” I blurted out. “Provided you help me.”

I heard the soft tapping of wood against rock.

Jumping Jack, that mysterious orange-skinned alchemist, emerged from the cave: a short, one-legged Purg, too puny to my human eye. His pants' left leg ended at the knee, revealing a wooden leg. He was gripping a walking stick, rough and thick. His every movement was jerky and sharp, creating the impression he was jumping, not walking. The box above his head informed me that I was looking at a *Master Alchemist*.

"Oh," I said mechanically.

"What did you say about killing Pull?" the alchemist asked, ignoring my blunder.

"Pull told me to bring him the elixir. He said, he'd set my friends free then. But I somehow doubt he's gonna keep his promise."

"You can bet your life he won't," Jumping Jack said confidently.

I studied him with curiosity: his lean sinewy body, his jerky movements, his nervous, intelligent face. You could hardly tell his real age — and Jack must have been real old, judging by the fact that he'd been the teacher of Tartr's own mentor.

"So what's that about killing Pull? Tell me."

I told him my plan. It wasn't exactly brilliant but it was all I had.

Jumping Jack proved to be an excellent listener. He hung on to my every word without stopping or interrupting me. Once I'd finished, he grilled me some more, wanting to know who I was, where I was from and how I'd laid my hands on such an amazing skill. I gave him a rather detailed account of everything I knew. He wasn't an Abbas, after all, so I shouldn't be worried that he might catch me lying. He didn't need to know the whole story. I was seeing him for the first time in my life. Our mutual enemy was the only thing we had in common.

Which was why I told him a few things about my initiation (admittedly being rather economical with the truth), how I'd thrown a team together to go on a raid against the rachnaid Queen, and about the wound which had forced me to spend a few days in bed. I left Two-Face out completely. Jumping Jack knew enough already in order to decide whether we were on the same page or not.

"Swear you won't try to attack me in my cave," he said sternly.

I raised my hand for a more dramatic effect. "I swear to Jumping Jack, the alchemist from Purgator, that I won't harm him in any way while I'm inside his cave."

A blinding flash confirmed that the Game had accepted my oath. Jack nodded. He turned away from me and waved his hand, causing the runes to light up one by one, then expire all at once.

"Come on in," the alchemist said, hopping in front of me.

I still couldn't work out how the cave had originally formed. Most likely, it was entirely the work of Mother Nature. But the tunnel which led toward the cave's main quarters was far too long and winding, so it must have been built that way on purpose.

As we walked, Jack stopped several times to warn me about an upcoming trap. The place was absolutely riddled with them, both physical and magic ones. I began to understand why no one had ever heard from his hapless intruders again.

Finally, the tunnel widened, opening into a… forest. It came as a complete surprise, literally freezing me by the exit as I tried to take the whole picture in.

Here, the precipitous cliff walls parted, giving way to trees and vines. Its one side was taken up by an alchemist table crowded with chemicals and test tubes; a thick rainforest made up the other.

The thing that puzzled me the most was the light that permeated the foliage, rising up to the sky. It was comprised of a myriad of bright dots which moved incessantly all around. It took me some time to make out the tiny winged human outlines within those spots of light, like the one I'd seen in Tartr's lamp.

"These are Fluorites. Wonderful people. Very intelligent. Not as clever as the Purgs but smarter than most beastmen."

I winced. Let's see what you say when you clap eyes on Litius, mister. That particular beastman was the Smithsonian on legs.

I didn't say it out loud though. It wasn't my problem, anyway. Some people could be animal defenders and most outrageous racists at the same time. What could you expect from a Purg, LOL.

"Where did you get them from?"

"I found part of their tribe in a burnt grove. That's what our peasants do in order to smoke out *manels*. I sheltered them in my cave. Later, more turned up. I planted these trees for them. I didn't think they would grow here but Fluorites have this positive effect on plants. Now look!"

With a sweep of his hand, Jack pointed at the cave and smiled for the first time. Aha. It looked like we'd found his weak spot.

On impulse, I thrust my hand out and cast Light.

Your Illusions skill has increased to level 8.

Immediately dozens of little creatures clung to my fingers, tickling them with their wings and little hands. Their gentle twittering was reminiscent of the babbling of a brook. Still, the moment the spell was over, they scattered in all directions, squeaking softly.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Intuition ability.

"That's exactly how you catch them," Jack said, his face turning grim. "They just can't resist the magic light. Very well. We shouldn't waste time. Let's go."

The alchemist hopped over to one of the filing cabinets next to the table, pulled open the doors and fumbled around inside, producing a small black pouch. He opened it and gingerly produced a fat vial of thick acid-orange liquid.

"This is the Elixir of Power," he said.

"It looks more like artificially colored fruit jelly," I admitted. "Does it really endow you with so much power?"

"Of course it doesn't," Jack smirked. "It's only a name."

"So what does it do, then?"

"It maxes out Strength. Irreversibly."

"How many points?"

"How should I know? You need to try it. It's a different result every time. It's a rare item, very expensive. It takes a long time to brew it."

"Why would Pull want it?"

"As far as I know, he's already used all the skills available to him to bring his Strength up. You can't get any higher. The only way to max it out…"

"…is this elixir," I finished for him.

“Exactly. Which is why you’re not getting it. Things might take a wrong turn and I don’t want Pull to lay his hands on it.”

“You don’t have to,” I said, pleased as Punch at my own cunning. “All you need to do is make something that resembles it. Something with the same kind of smell, color and consistency. I’ll take care of the rest.”

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Chapter 5

BIRDS OF A FEATHER flock together. If you're a happy, cheerful person with a positive outlook, you'll be surrounded by the same throughout your life. If you're a pessimistic sonovabitch constantly expecting the Universe to screw you, that's exactly what you're going to get. And if you're a parasitic slimeball sponging off other people, that's exactly the kind of company you're gonna keep. Because it makes things easier that way.

Still, for every action there is a reaction. That was also something I'd realized a long time ago. You shouldn't be confusing it with poetic justice, simply because not everyone gets credit when it's due. But if you're climbing over other people's heads in order to reach your goal, be prepared that sooner or later somebody else's foot will trample your own ginger mop into the ground.

All said and done, it was only fair that today it was my own foot shod in the Boot of Solophon that was going to administer justice. But first, I needed to wait for just the right moment.

In the end, I'd only spent a couple of hours at Jack's waiting for him to prepare a homeopathic potion similar in taste and smell to the Elixir of Power. I whiled away the time playing with Fluorites by casting Light for them. Although I hadn't managed to raise Illusions any further, I'd discovered a very interesting thing.

At some point, I'd cast Electric Arc, aiming it at a bare wall. Just fooling around, you know. Still, the tiny flying creatures took it very seriously and attacked me for real, forcing Jack to interfere. He cast a flash of light in the direction of his makeshift "forest", distracting the little folk and thus saving me. He then told me in no uncertain terms what he thought about my intellectual facilities. According to him, "it was common knowledge" that the Fluorites loved light but hated electric storms "and

everything reminiscent of them". I said nothing — but I did make a mental note.

On a more positive side, Jumping Jack had bought 30 eggs from me, at 20 grams dust each. I'd have sold him more but his demand was rather limited. Also, it turned out that he did have some Devil's Sulfur. Unfortunately, my joy was short lived because he charged me 300 grams dust for every gram of it. Besides, he only had like 20% of the amount I needed. So I gave this idea a miss for a while. Two grams of sulfur weren't going to solve the problem but would definitely leave me broke. Pointless.

A few hours later, however, I finally received the potion decanted into a nice fat vial — one of the biggest Jack had — and all but ran back to Virhort.

It was almost midday when I arrived at the local Community. I decided against visiting Tartr for fear of bumping into Hunter, even though I thought he'd already lost his patience and ported back. Which was more than you could say about me.

I lurked in the shadow of a nearby hut, watching Pull's house from the other side of the square. My stomach was rumbling a sad tune, threatening to uncover my hapless surveillance attempt. My body was giving a stench so psychedelic it was literally mind-boggling. On top of all that, I couldn't keep my eyes open short of propping them up with my fingers.

To add insult to injury, I had to stay in this position for a good hour and a half because Pull's goons were busy doing anything other than what they were supposed to. They were sitting around drinking and stuffing their faces, completely ignoring the fact that they were supposed to wreak extortion upon the local business folk.

Still, after a while the local gods (may I never cross their paths!) must have heard me. The front door creaked, letting out two of the goons. I

recognized Rock as one of them. Good. I wasn't in a hurry to find out his main development branch — not right now, anyway.

I staggered toward Pull's mansion on rubbery legs. I wouldn't call my plan too audacious. Crazy was more like it. Which was why I thought it might just work. The problem was, I had no idea how fast Pull's bodyguards might be able to react. Pull's own reaction times were a mystery to me too. According to Jack, he was all but a pocket-size Chuck Norris and one of the strongest creatures around here. So if things didn't go according to plan, I'd be the first to find out.

The front door opened. "Hi, I'll just pop round to see Pull," I dangled the vial filled with thick orange liquid in front of the bodyguard's face. "It's about the elixir."

He promptly reached out to get it from me but I slid the vial back into the inventory. He could forget it.

This time I didn't have to wait at all. They flagged me through without any further ado. Either they'd already got used to seeing me or they had special orders in my regard. Like, "*if anyone comes from Cesspit saying they have the Elixir of Power, bring them in out of turn*".

The setup was just as I'd expected it to be: Pull himself, two bodyguards sitting at the table and another one behind my back. It was way past lunchtime so they were all busy playing cards. I managed to get a glimpse of them: a strange pack with pictures of dragons, knights and serpents. I could tell that it had more than four suits. Still, I had other things to concentrate on.

"So you've got it, is that what you're saying?" Pull devoured me with his eyes, curious and mistrustful at the same time.

I understood him well. Some half-blood Korl — a stranger with no fame or reputation required for the task — had apparently managed to succeed in what Arts herself had refused to entertain. Confidence was key. I

produced the vial in a few smooth, unhurried movements and worked the stopper out.

Gradually, the (fake) elixir’s tangy aroma began spreading over the room.

“Give it to me!”

“Not so fast. First I need to see my friends.”

“Trulo, bring them here, quick,” Pull said without taking his eyes from the fat vial. “In the meantime, let’s see if it’s the right thing. Whatcha staring at, Korl? Taste it. Just a taste!”

I knew he’d say that. I could drink all of it if needed, considering it was just some fragrant water. Still, Pull had a point: I should go easy on it so that the governor got the most of it.

I took a tiny swig, demonstratively swilled the liquid in my mouth, then swallowed it.

Pull wasn’t in a hurry. He watched me calmly, apparently trying to monitor any changes in my stats. Predictably, there weren’t any.

In the end, he lost his patience. “Erg, give me the elixir.”

The goon behind my back had apparently been waiting for this order. He grabbed me by the shoulder with one hand, using the other to snatch the vial from my sweating fingers.

One moment, guys. I still had the most important thing to do.

[∞]

“Erg, give me the elixir.”

By then, I'd already donned the white mask of Savior’s Avatar and was looking at the only available ability: Transformation of Liquids. It had its own progress bar, just like Resurrection did, meaning that I could transform the artificially-colored water in the vial into any known liquid of my choice.

I set it at 10 seconds. Anything shorter would be pointless because Pull might smell a rat. Anything longer that that wasn’t an option either, because as I’d already worked out, the governor’s patience was shorter than his remaining life span.

The trickiest thing now was to activate the ability. I focused, trying to refresh the school chemistry course in my memory. A “colorless, odorless, syrupy liquid”… thick and oily… I wasn’t sure if entering its formula might help, but I remembered it anyway: H2SO4. In theory, that should work.

Trulo snatched the elixir from me, simultaneously shoving me aside. He stepped toward the governor and handed the coveted vial to him. All this might have taken a couple of seconds, not more.

With bated breath I watched him, unable to take my eyes off his wary face. He sniffed the elixir, gave me another suspicious look, then took a sip.

And another. And again.

Finally, he set the empty vial on the table and wrinkled his forehead. “How long does it take to work?”

“Four more seconds,” I croaked, trying to suppress the tremor in my voice.

I’d just killed a man. This was a premeditated murder, not self-defense. Not slaying your opponent in an honest fight but a devious,

cunning assassination.

But had I even had a choice? I tried to argue with myself. I didn't stand a chance against Pull in an honest fight. And there was simply no other way to rescue my friends.

Pull's eyes bulged. "What the…"

He ripped his shirt to shreds and began scratching at his skin, all the while staring at me. His nails left bloodied trails on his chest. He started gasping for air as his respiratory system began to pack up. Blood gushed from his nose; the strongest man in Virhort slumped to the ground, vacating his "throne". For a while he kept convulsing on the floor; then it was all over.

You've killed a Player who was neutral to you.

-100 karma points. Current level: 980. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You have been stripped of the Hero of Light characteristic

Your fame has increased to 5.

Change of development branch available: Brute. You have 24 hours to decide between your current development branch and the new one.

You've gained the Charisma ability.

You've gained the Talking With Lower Animals spell.

Your reputation has changed to Cutthroat.

You've helped a Player who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +1000. You gravitate to the Light Side.

New characteristic available: Hero of Light

You've helped a Player who is neutral to you....

In a blink of an eye, I received enough messages to drive anyone off their rocker. To put it short, by killing Pull, I'd helped thirty-seven other Players who were neutral to me. They must have been some of the Community members who'd had an ax to grind with their local kinglet. All in all, my Karma stopped at 1720 pt. Not bad for one day.

But the good news ended here. I was still in the room, surrounded by the deceased governor's goons who were already coming back to their senses.

I ducked to one side, pressed my back against the wall and drew the knife. I had two more time rewinds left: one per each bodyguard. Plus Trulo should be back soon. The odds didn't look good, considering that the men were bound to have their own aces up their sleeves.

That's when I realized something very simple. My situation may have been dire but I wasn't afraid anymore. I became a coiled spring which could uncurl any moment, giving my adversary an almighty whack. My breathing was calm and level as I looked at my enemies, waiting for them to strike in order to make my own move. Me, who used to cross the street at the sight of a feral dog, now openly looked fear in the eye.

My adversaries must have sensed this change of auras — because what they did next surprised me a lot.

"I charge thirty grams dust a week. Ker's fee is twenty-five," one of the goons said, staring at the empty spot where their boss had just lain. All that Pull had left behind was some dust, a small sheathed sword and whatever shabby clothes he'd been wearing.

“Meaning?” I asked without lowering the knife.

“That’s what it costs to hire us,” the warrior explained. “Aren’t you gonna become the new governor?”

“Ah-ha, I see,” I drawled unhurriedly as I feverishly rummaged through the avalanche of recent messages.

Found it!

You’ve killed the Governor of the Community of Virhort. The right of brute force which governs the Eastern and Southern provinces of Purgator allows you to either usurp power or hold an election in order to vote in a new ruler.

Usurpation: -200 pt. Karma. Recommended Fame level: 8. A lower level of Fame might result in popular discontent and mass protests.

Election: +200 pt. Karma

I needed their town like a hole in the head. Not at a detriment to my own Karma, anyway, seeing as I was on my way to join the sainthood club. It’s true that most attempts to hand power down directly into the masses’ unwashed hands rarely ended well, but these were none of my problems.

I wasn’t in a hurry to reply. I had no idea how the ex-city guards might take the news of the arrival of democracy at a place traditionally controlled by them. I had a funny feeling it wasn’t going to please them. So I tried to play for time.

“What about the others?” I cast a meaningful glance at the door that Trulo had only just exited. “You think they’ll agree?”

“Sure they will. They weren’t born yesterday.”

“Makes me wonder though. You sure you won’t double-cross me at the first opportunity?”

“Beg your pardon! We can swear you an oath, if you wish. We’ve been with Pull for three Terran years, ever since we left Cesspit.”

“Terran years?”

“Sure,” the goon visibly relaxed, apparently thinking things were off to a good start. “These Purgs, they have 686 days in a calendar year — or is it 687? But normally, when you say “a year” you mean your own year in your native world. So, is it a deal? We can guarantee your absolute safety.”

“It didn’t work very well for Pull, though,” I said, listening in: I thought I’d heard footsteps.

He shrugged. “Nobody asked him to drink your stuff. He should have waited. Had someone attacked him with a weapon…” he slammed his fist against the palm of his hand, showing what would have happened to such a reckless idiot.

His game was already perfectly clear to me. He was trying to showcase their services in order to sell them at the highest possible price. But time was flying, rapidly approaching the moment that I’d started all this conundrum for in the first place.

The door opened noiselessly. They pushed Litius in. His hands were tied. Trulo followed, dragging Arts along. She was a sorry sight: her arms and wrists were covered in bruises from all the bonds; they’d even tied her hands together to make sure she couldn’t move them at all. And what’s with the gag? Were they really so afraid of her?

Trulo stared dimly at us, at Pull’s empty “throne”, at his fellow goons, then turned his stunned gaze back to me. You could tell his head wasn’t his strongest body part. We all waited, wary of disturbing the fragile equilibrium.

“Did he… you know…” Trulo pointed at the throne.

The one who’d been negotiating with me nodded.

Trulo focused his gaze on me, studying me hesitantly like some sort of museum exhibit. He was probably trying to work out how it had happened that his boss was dead while I was still alive. He appeared lost.

This was an important strategic moment I could use to my advantage.

“Untie the prisoners, please,” I said matter-of-factly, the kind of voice we use with bakers or bus drivers.

Which probably explains the effect it had on him. Trulo started as if I’d just yelled at him, and looked pleadingly at his friends who averted their eyes. It just couldn’t get any better.

“Untie the prisoners,” I raised my voice slightly.

Trulo gave in. He turned to Arts and hurried to disentangle her from her bonds. I was a bit worried she might attack him the moment her hands were free: disrupting the delicate balance wasn’t a very healthy idea at the moment. Still, she was wiser than that. As soon as she was free, she eased herself away from Trulo, pulled the gag out of her mouth, kneaded her jaw and started untying Litius.

That done, she pulled her staff and sword out of her bag. Why hadn’t they taken them from her, I wondered, only to realize straight away that they couldn’t. Only dead Players could drop loot. The only other way of getting their stuff was if they gave it to you willingly — or under torture, I suppose.

I also noticed that despite her weapons, Arts knew better than to assume a combat stance. She simply stepped closer to me. The girl was a

born tactics whiz.

“We’re leaving,” I said to the one who’d been trying to negotiate with me.

“What about the deal?”

“We’ll discuss it later. First, my friends need to recover a little.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the long silence that followed. We stood motionless for a good fifteen seconds, each of which dramatically shrank our chances of getting out without bloodshed. So I just headed for the door.

As I walked, I had a small epiphany about something that should have dawned on me at least a decade ago. Confidence plays a huge role in one’s success. Had I started to falter and mince words, things might have taken a turn against me. Sometimes action is the best decision. Actions are simple: they’re either right or wrong, no middle ground there. Still, sometimes it’s much better to do something and see the result straight away than to stay indefinitely in the dark.

I was lucky. The goon stepped out of my way and lowered his eyes like a shy bride-to-be, letting me through. Litius was the next to squeeze his furry bulk through the narrow doorway, followed by Arts.

“No running,” I said under my breath the moment we stepped outside. “Don’t look back.”

You’ve taken the next step toward acquiring the Leadership ability.

The time it took us to cross the square in front of the governor’s mansion seemed the longest in my life. Things like sitting in the dentist’s chair or being stuck in a traffic jam on our perennially closed city bridge felt like a split second compared to this. I could sense three pairs of eyes follow our progress, their hatred and malice palpable.

Finally, we reached the first house and turned off into a side lane. When I finally stopped, I very nearly collapsed onto the cobblestones. My knees shook; my head was going round with the stress. Adrenaline coursed my blood by the bucket.

We looked at each other, and then we just put our arms around each other and stood in a group hug for a few seconds. When we eased away in embarrassment, I felt the immeasurable pressure gradually subside.

“Litius, I’m very sorry,” I said, avoiding looking him in the eye. “Please forgive me. That was very stupid of me. I didn’t mean to let you down.”

“N-n-no, S-s-sergei, no. It’s me who sh-sh-should be s-s-sorry for d-d-doubting you. I th-th-thought I’d never s-s-see you ag-g-gain.”

“How could I?”

A couple of city guards returning from duty appeared in the street. We fell silent. On seeing us, they stopped talking and visibly tensed up as they walked past us, pinning us with their glares. Once they turned the corner, we heard their boot heels clatter on the cobblestones as the two went running to the mansion to find out what was going on.

“Let’s go to the tavern,” I offered. “It’s busy enough. Just give me a second.”

I opened the interface and activated the Election branch.

+200 karma points. Current level: +1920. You gravitate to the Light Side.

“That’s it, I’m done. Let’s go now!”

The tavern was packed and noisy. When we entered, the clamor of voices died momentarily as we took our places under the local crowd's watchful stares. I ordered a meal and some beer from the tavern keeper who looked rather lost. Service here was non-existent. They'd brought us a jug of beer straight away, but neither the food nor even the mugs were prompt in coming.

Arts didn't seem very happy about that. She grabbed the heavy jug with both hands and took a few big swigs.

"My mouth is dry after their gag," she explained. "Now tell us how you managed to pull it all off?"

So I began telling them my story of 'Sergei Demidov vs. the world'. By the time I finished, they'd already been long tucking into their meals; Litius had almost polished off his dinner. I stared at my own plateful of fragrant hot sausages and sauerkraut but just couldn't stop talking. I owed it to my friends.

"So that's basically it," I said, then gulped down a mugful of beer.

A few Purgs barged into the tavern, shouted something in their own language and ran back out, followed by the larger part of the patrons.

"They're g-g-going to loot the governor's mansion," Litius explained. "Oh by the w-w-way, why didn't you p-p-pick up the loot?"

He handed me the sheathed sword and poured some dust on the table. 134 grams.

"When did you do that?" I asked.

"When you were too busy staring each other down," Litius smiled, looking utterly pleased with himself. I almost expected him to start purring. "It only took a few seconds. I couldn't take his clothes, though."

I didn’t hear him because I’d already drawn the sheathed sword and frozen speechless. I even double-checked its stats, just in case.

Slayer

Material: Moon steel

Charmed to deal damage to creatures of flesh and blood

Restriction: Players only

“Holy Jesus,” Arts said. “It’s just like yours, isn’t it?”

“Judging by its stats, they’re identical.”

“This d-d-doesn’t happen very often but it doesn’t mean that it c-c-can’t happen at all,” Litius said, visibly anxious. “B-b-bladesmiths are known for making p-p-paired swords.”

“But why?”

“Was it the Chorul who gave you the other one?” Arts asked.

“Yes. No, no, sorry. Not to me: he gave it to Hunter. Who then gave it to me, yes.”

“We can only guess how this one ended up in Pull’s possession,” Arts brushed her bangs away from her face. “If we presume that the Chorul knew it too…”

“Then the Chorul must have known that I’d meet Pull.”

“And that you’d kill him.”

We fell silent, trying to take in this latest development. Still, the longer we sat there, the clearer it became that we weren’t going to come up

with anything useful.

“Okay, let’s forget this wretched sword for a while,” I said. “We need to be thinking how to rescue Traug. Or rather, where we can find some Devil’s Sulfur.”

“Th-th-that’s the easy p-p-part.”

“Yeah right. All I need to do is go to Firoll and loot a Kabirid graveyard. The problem is, I gravitate to Light now, don’t I? So I have no access to that particular world.”

Litius smiled. “You don’t need to. What you do need is go back to C-c-cesspit.”

Chapter 6

IT'S NOT A SECRET that throughout our history, Russians didn't particularly appreciate intellectual prowess. The very word "*intelligentsia"* was normally used with a degree of snide sarcasm, especially as it was often a generous advance in regards to someone with basic college education. The mere phrase "You think you're the smart one here, eh?" was usually followed by a liberal amount of butt kicking.

The irony of it was, this was exactly what I wanted to do to Litius right now. I wanted to punch his hello-Kitty face in right now, simply to get some answers out of him. Just look at that mysterious sonovabitch, too busy to look up from his computer screen!

The Internet café next to our local Community back in Cesspit was rather empty. Two teenagers in the far corner kept giggling and blushing over their computer. Next to them sat a timid old lady who looked up from her keyboard and asked for advice every time she touched the pad. Opposite us was a slightly overweight young woman about my age in a business suit. Plus the three of us.

The worst thing was, I was the one with absolutely nothing to do. Even Arts, once she'd realized that we were there for the duration, pulled out her sketchbook and began scribbling in it with abandon. But how about me? I could, I suppose, try and systemize all that had happened within the last twenty-four hours.

First thing first: our financial situation. Killing Pull had made me 124 grams dust richer. Of which I'd already paid 96 grams for a teleport back. Which meant I still had 839 grams in the kitty. A week ago, it would have been a veritable king's ransom for the old me. Now, however, I realized that these were peanuts for someone who wanted to travel between worlds.

My Katzbalger was also in the bag. I'd collected it from the blacksmith who'd done an excellent job. The sword appeared perfectly new as if it had just been forged.

Black Imperial Katzbalger

Origin: Roin Province

Material: Roin steel

Charmed to exponentially increase the damage dealt to positive-karma Players depending on their level of Light karma.

An improvement slot is available. Improvement of the sword can be performed by a Master Blacksmith.

Jesus. I'd only wanted to have it fixed, and now I had all this hassle to deal with? I'd love to level the sword up, of course, but where was I supposed to find a Master Blacksmith? The Purg blacksmith hadn't even offered to improve it. Wonder if I could find one here in Cesspit?

Still, the loot I'd got off the governor was the best. Predictably, he hadn't had a Divine Avatar on him: he certainly hadn't been as affluent as myself. But he'd still bequeathed me a skill and a spell. Shame we'd lost such a generous individual.

Charisma (Rhetoric) — the ability to endear oneself to both Players and Commoners except in cases when your reputation clashes with that of other Seekers.

Your current level of Rhetoric allows you to choose a race especially susceptible to your Charisma.

The races you've already come across:

Humanoid

Semi-humanoid

Beastmen

Semi-dead

I didn’t know what to think. Humanoid I could understand. Ditto for beastmen. But what did they mean by semi-humanoid and semi-dead?

I decided not to overthink it and tapped *Humanoid.*

Your Charisma has a positive effect on humans, Korls, Zvergs and Purgs, except in cases when your reputation clashes with that of other Seekers or in the presence of other provocative factors.

Now, the spell.

Talking With Lower Animals (Sorcery). Allows you to understand or control some insentient beings.

Use: on self. Cost: 50 mana points. Duration: 30 seconds.

No idea how I could apply this, but it certainly looked like an interesting spell. I might have to find some guinea pigs to try it on. Literally.

“Litius, how much longer are we supposed to wait? I was told that Traug would be sent down the mines as soon as the commandant and his goons arrived.”

“The Archali won’t send the garrison to the city during an unstable period like this. They won’t be moving the troops until the end of the first cycle of the Blue Moon. Which is still two days from now.”

He spoke confidently and quickly without any of his habitual stuttering, all the while clicking the mouse and scrolling the pages flashing across his computer screen.

“Their moons and their wretched cycles!” I grumbled. “Red, blue, whatever next?”

“They also have a Yellow Moon — or Neutral, as they call it,” Litius switched his attention from the screen, looked at me and heaved a sigh. “Here, look, all three of them,” he said, opening Paint.

He drew a flattened black sphere surrounded by three circles: red, blue and yellow.

“The black one is Purgator, isn’t it?” I asked.

“No. The black one is Purgator’s main satellite. It absorbs all the light of its sun without reflecting it. That’s why you can’t see it. The three moons orbit it while it in turn orbits Purgator. So as you can well imagine, there’re two moons constantly visible in the sky, one of which is in a superposition to the other. Currently, it’s the Blue one.”

“Did you just say that in Russian?” I asked. “I didn’t understand a word.”

“What’s there to understand,” Arts butted in without taking her eyes off her sketchbook. “At the moment, the Blue Moon is waxing and the Red one is waning. Once it completely disappears, the Yellow one will rise. It’s neutral in that it doesn’t affect either mobs or Players.”

“The problem is, all this astronomy for dummies isn’t going to help us rescue Traug,” I said. “In another day or two they’re gonna send him down the mines.”

“I think by then we’ll have had your Korl free. Sergei, would you terribly mind not distracting me? I have too much data to process.”

“How much time do you need?”

“A couple of hours. Maybe a little bit more.”

“Aha. Listen guys, do you mind if I rush off home? I need a wash and all that.”

Arts looked up from her sketchbook, gave me a long look and nodded. “Yeah, you surely could use one.”

Cheeky cow! The funny thing was, I was the stinky one although she’d been the one who’d been locked up. Could Pull have kept her in a room with a hot tub? In which case, I shouldn’t have killed him.

I called a cab and went outside, scrolling through the incoming text messages on my phone. They covered the entire range of human emotions from anger to accusations, even blacklisting me for a good 12 hours, then back to anger. It had been very stupid of me to have hoped that Julia might have somehow overlooked my three-day absence.

Should I give her a call? No way. All hell might break loose. Much better to send her a carrier pigeon as a dove of peace. Due to the lack of an actual bird, I used Messenger:

Sorry, I was away on business and left my cell at home.

Good job my Mom hadn’t called. In which case I would have already been reported missing to the fire brigade, the police and every morgue in town. In future, I shouldn’t just disappear. I might need to train my dear house goblin as a personal assistant. What else was I supposed to do? Desperate times require desperate measures.

Curiously, the moment I’d thought about Mom, her picture appeared on the phone screen, followed by the ring tone.

“Yes?” I said timidly, amazed at my parent’s extrasensory skill.

“Hi, Sergei. Everything okay?”

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m getting four meals a day, exercising regularly and working a lot,” I reported. “I’ve even quit smoking.”

“Good boy! Way to go! Now if only you could find yourself a good woman.”

“That can wait.”

I wasn’t in a hurry to tell her about Julia. I had no intention of introducing her as my bride-to-be. That would only lead to more remarks like “When are you going to get married? When are we gonna get some grandchildren? I was nineteen when I had you,” etc., etc.

Both my sisters had turned out to be much more ambitious than humble me. They wanted to have a career first: the one who’d already flown the nest as well as the one that was still there. So all my Mom’s hopes of future procreation now rested on my shoulders. Not that I had anything against the actual dirty deed, I just wasn’t in a hurry to have kids. All the more now that I’d become a Seeker.

“We’re all grieving,” Mom said. “Granny Sveta’s just died.”

I scratched the back of my head, desperately trying to remember who the hell Granny Sveta was. We had literally shedloads of family members, half of whom we only met at either weddings or funerals.

As if turned out, the reason for my not remembering her was pretty obvious: she was my father’s second cousin twice removed and I’d been nine years old when I’d seen her last.

“Don’t you remember she gave you that toy car?”

Yeah right. One of my life's most memorable events indeed. "Sorry, Mom, but what's it got to do with me?"

"What do you mean? You're a Demidov, aren't you?"

Not those stories of family history again! The funny thing was, Mom seemed to be the one hell-bent on preserving them. Sometimes she gave you the impression she'd gotten married for the sake of the name alone. She definitely was more Demidov than me or my siblings.

"It's already bad that Lily can't make it because she has an important business trip on," she said. "But you're obliged to."

Oh great. Good on you, Lily, clever girl. Thanks a lot.

I opened my mouth to say that I had too much work but shut it straight away. Sadly I watched the cab pull up at the curb as I listened to Mom's indignant monologue. I nodded to the driver, climbed into the back seat, and he pulled away.

"Okay, okay, what do I need to do?"

"All you need to do is be there at the wake. I'll ask Darya to text you the time and address."

My Mom was a bit wary of smartphones. She could read an incoming message but she hated writing them.

"But do you think you might make it to the funeral?"

"Mooom!" I protested, as if this was about to break our fragile truce.

'Okay, okay. See you later."

I hung up and heaved a sigh. As a Player, you could be as tough as nails, killing ancient gods for breakfast, but parents would always be

parents. Even at an advanced age, you still risked their wrath. They just didn't care for any of your hard-earned merits.

The migrant driver gave me a hostile look in the rear-view mirror. What was wrong with him? I'd turned Charisma on, hadn't I? Naturally, I had no intention of seducing him but the least I could have hoped for was his goodwill. He'd have been better off keeping the inside of his car clean. It was stinking.

I took a deep breath through my nose and blushed. I was the one who was stinking. Several days without a shower nor deodorant had taken their toll. No amount of Charisma could help something that only some soap and water could right.

I opened the window on the sly. The driver didn't' say a word, even though it was quite cold outside. How I understood him!

We drove on in dead silence. I gave him a five-hundred note instead of three-fifty. For his inconvenience.

Still, somebody above must have decided that today wasn't to be my day. A noisy group of four youngsters just above the legal age limit blocked the way to the front door.

But that was only half of the problem. They mobbed the Professor, making fun of him.

Even the old me wouldn't have walked impassively past. Still, in the old days I might have simply got my ass kicked for the trouble and left with my tail between my legs. But now…

"Hey you, dickheads! Leave him alone!"

One of the louts — a squat skinhead with a yellowed bruise covering his cheekbone — turned to me. Puffing on his cigarette, he looked me over and grinned. "Do you want your teeth rearranged, Mr. Atlas?"

Of course. I'd completely forgotten that Commoners still saw me as a jug-eared wimp. What could have Julia possibly found in me? I knew that girls love with their ears but there had to be something she must have initially seen in me. Never mind. That's not what I should be thinking about.

I took a step toward him. "How about you watch your own ass?"

Now I'd managed to draw their attention to myself. One of the goons even let go of the Professor's collar; their leader lowered his head and moved toward me. His sidekicks crowded behind him.

"You'd better say your prayers, stupid," the leader said.

I didn't think so. Neither praying nor talking interested me much. I could see that this entry-level bully could easily outreason me using advanced street rhetoric. But when it came to a hand-to-hand, I just might mess his pretty face up a little.

Which was exactly what I got down to doing.

My first blow turned out to be nothing special. I hadn't punched his lights out but I'd knocked him down nice and proper. I could see he was still conscious. In a moment, he'd recover from the initial shock and get back to his feet. But the three others were unlikely to wait for him.

I have to admit I'd a bit overestimated my skill, thinking that the few sessions with Hunter must have turned me into a top fighter. They hadn't. I dodged a direct hook only to miss a good kick in the teeth that made my whole jaw ring. Gosh it hurt. Despite all my gaming abilities, an appointment with the dentist was on the cards.

[∞]

I ducked and punched the second attacker in the groin. Next time he'd know better than use his feet.

The system must have appreciated my elegant solution:

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 8.

Just as I read this, I glimpsed a fist heading for my cheekbone. Instinctively I blocked it with my hand.

Your Blocking skill has increased to level 3.

My opponents immediately punched me in the liver. While I doubled up in pain, I received another blow to the shoulder which made the whole bone sing.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 3.

Not that I was very happy to receive this last message. My enemies pummeled me with blows. I had no time to think. In all honesty, I should have rewound time again. Instead, I pointed my hand at the nearest opponent and cast Electric Arc.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 11.

It was a beauty! The goon flew several feet through the air and hit his head on the tarmac as he fell. The others mechanically stepped back.

"What are you waiting for? Wipe him out!" demanded the leader who'd by then already scrambled back to his feet.

"Nah. He's got a Taser. It's not worth it," replied the goon nearest to me.

"Let's try a little one-on-one," I offered, trying to will my pumping heart to slow down.

The leader hesitated, looking at his downed minion. “No, we can’t be bothered. Whatcha starin’ at, morons? Get Bear up. And you… we’re not finished with you yet.”

I grimly watched the three of them leave, dragging their electrically supercharged soldier along. It’s true that we had our fair share of thugs — but the audacity of it! Running the ‘hood in broad daylight! I didn’t like it at all.

“Thank you, Sergei,” the Professor spoke.

I started. I’d forgotten all about him.

“What strange young men,” he added.

“What did they want from you?”

“They wanted to talk to me, I presume. They came over to me and asked me whether I was Russian or not. Then they turned nasty. They said that it was because of the likes of me that Russia was in the shit that it is. They said, good Russians didn’t drink.”

“Sure. Good Russians walk around beating up senior citizens. We need to find out where they’re from.”

“Some sort of trade school, maybe?” he offered.

“Then they’re all from the other end of town. In any case, I’ll look into it. Have a nice evening, sir.”

I walked upstairs to my place completely exhausted, hoping against hope that Bumpkin hadn’t trashed it beyond repair in the few days of my absence.

I opened the door. It just wasn't my day today. It looked as if someone had kept a rabid dog there all week. All the chairs were tipped over; the kitchen table was covered in a thick layer of grease; all my clothes were strewn around; the wallpaper was torn to shreds.

By the time I walked into the room, nothing would have surprised me. What I saw was a disheveled Bumpkin, his eyes red and swollen with tears.

"Master? Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's really me," I said, perching on the edge of the couch.

He grabbed at his head. "Are you alive?!"

"And you decided that something had happened to me, is that it? Is that why this place looks like the last day of Pompeii?"

"Yes, but… No. but…" the house goblin looked completely lost, "I *sensed* that you'd passed away."

It was my turn to be surprised. So he'd sensed my being dead, was that it? How very interesting.

"Excuse me?" I said. "Tell me about it."

"Well, the other day — three days from now — I was making you some cabbage soup. Proper cabbage soup with a nice big fat beef bone. And suddenly it was curtains. I just felt so empty inside. That's how I knew that you were…"

Three days from now? I did a bit of math. That'd be Tuesday. Probably at the exact moment when I'd died. Which meant that the bond between a house goblin and his master was much stronger than just sharing a household. These were some kind of sacred ties. There was no other way

of explaining how he could have possibly sensed my untimely demise across several worlds.

“False alarm,” I told him. “I did die a little bit but not for keeps. So any further destructive orgies are canceled. So I’m afraid, my dear Bumkin, you’re gonna have to clean up now.”

“Master,” he rushed toward me and clung to my stinking clothes. That was a bit embarrassing.

“Okay, okay, stop your nonsense. Everything’s all right now. Let me go and clean up first, then you can wash my clothes.”

“Of course, of course. Right away. I’m gonna rustle you up something to eat first. And I’ll clean up the place real quick,” he started fussing around, speeding about the room like a Duracell bunny.

I staggered into the bathroom, peeled off all my rags, crawled under the shower and worked up a good lather, rubbing my skin red raw with the sponge to wash off the dirt of Purgator. Then I soaped up again and gave myself a good rinse. When I left the bathroom, Bumpkin was busy in the kitchen, humming a tune under his breath.

I listened to my body. I wasn’t hungry at all. Just very sleepy.

I staggered over to the couch, unfolded it and made up the bed. Then I lay down on it, stretched and shuddered with pleasure. Jesus, it felt good. All the worries and concerns of the last few days had blended into one confusing, entangled blur. I yawned and sank into a deep sleep.

I was jolted awake by the insistent ringing of my phone back in the bathroom. It must have been ringing for quite a while. I forced my eyes open. The room was dark; the apartment was quiet. It looked like it was already nighttime.

Still not quite awake, I climbed to my feet and sleep-walked into the bathroom. My phone screen read: *Litius.*

“Hello,” I slumped onto the toilet seat cover and yawned.

“S-s-sergei? Why did it t-t-take you so long to answer the t-t-telephone? I’ve f-f-found it. I’ve arranged everything. I know where to g-g-get Devil’s Sulfur!”

“Where?”

“In Paris!”

“There’s nowhere any closer?” I was desperately trying to work out what he was saying as my brain wanted to go back to energy saving mode.

“Give it to me,” I heard Art’s muffled voice. After a couple of seconds, the speaker exploded into her mezzo soprano voice. “Sergei, if you don’t come now, I’m gonna cut your beastman to shreds. He’s been screwing my brains for the last several hours with this sulfur of his.”

“So how does it feel, being screwed with sulfur?”

“Please!”

“Okay, okay, I won’t be long. Do you want me to go straight to Paris or somewhere a bit closer?”

She paused, breathing angrily into the receiver, before she deigned to reply they were in the Community.

I pressed the red button and climbed back to my feet. Was there some kind of a Players’ rights protection society here? Somewhere they dished out health hazard bonuses? If so I was quite ripe to join.

“Bumpkin? Any chance of me grabbing something to eat? I might be off again soon…”

Chapter 7

THEY SAY THAT A CRISIS reveals one's true face. I tend to agree, with one reservation: you often get to see a person's true face (or that of any other creature, for that matter) at a moment of inactivity. Waiting can become a tough test for quite a few.

As it turned out, patience wasn't our beastman's forte. He reminded me of the donkey in *Shrek* who kept asking, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" Apparently, Arts wasn't known for her angelic patience either, judging by her very curt and explicit reply to his umpteenth appeal.

By the time of my arrival, the standoff between the two resembled the 1993 Czechoslovakia showdown. They were still sitting at the same table in the Syndicate but facing in opposite directions. It took all of my persuasive powers to make them see reason and shake them out of their mutual grudge. Only when I'd said that Traug's life depended upon it, they finally put their respective brains in gear.

"So you wanna say that it's possible to get some sulfur on Paris — or rather, in Lutum?"

"According to your fish-loving cat, yes," Arts sniggered.

I knew it was only a jibe. She knew better than to doubt Litius' intellectual prowess. "Wait a sec."

I went over to the bar and asked for a jug of beer and three clay mugs. I then walked back my place, set the mugs in front of each of us and poured out the beer. Litius took a few catlike laps as was his habit, then downed the whole mug in two gulps.

“Now, what do we know about Devil’s Sulfur?” he began with the air of a university lecturer.

“I don’t doubt you’re gonna tell us in a minute.”

“I am,” he said, cunningly pouring himself another beer without asking. “We all know the myth of Lucifer, the arch father of the Kabirids and their alpha demon…”

“Finally some of the Commoners’ myths seem to make sense here,” I murmured.

“… It’s common knowledge that he had mercury flowing in his veins, and his whole body was made of sulfur…”

“I have a funny feeling that he didn’t die from environmental problems, did he?”

“Will you shut up, please?” Arts said, quite unexpectedly for me. “Let Litius speak.”

Aha, so apparently there were some people unfamiliar with this myth still. I took a sip of my beer and shrugged.

“So all of Lucifer’s direct descendants preserved a part of him in their own bodies. That’s what they call Devil’s Sulfur. It’s indestructible, which is why it’s the only thing left of a Kabirid after their death. The higher the demon is in their hierarchy, the more sulfur he or she drops.”

“Awesome. Now the main bit, please? How come some parts of Kabirids’ bodies ended up in Par- er, in Lutum?”

“That’s easy. Provided you know the history of the worlds and can put two and two together.”

“Which is something you’re very good at. Please keep to the point.”

Litius nodded. “That got me thinking. When was the biggest battle between the Archali and the Kabirids which saw the greatest number of demons slain? That’s when I remembered the event which has a different name in every world it affected. In Elysium they call it the Deposition of the Fallen; in Firoll, Backstabbing Day; and in Purgator, the Death Hour of the Curved Daggers. Here in Cesspit it’s known as the St. Bartholomew’s Massacre.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Wasn’t it when all the Huguenots slaughtered the Catholics?”

He nodded. “Only the other way round. The Catholics massacred the Huguenots. Officially, mind you. What really happened was that the Archali had pitted Catherine de Medici, the queen of France, against the Kabirids. Then again, there were apparently some Purgator documents dating back to that period which mentioned some dark rumors about Catherine being a half-blood. Apparently, her mother had had some angelic meat on the side.”

“Litius! It’s complicated as it is! Can you keep it straight, please?”

“Okay, if you wish. To keep it straight and simple, a few hundred years ago, the Archali started hunting down Kabirids all around the interworld network, including those who’d settled down in Cesspit. Ironically, the majority of them lived in France. Which is why we need to find whatever Kabirid remains we can dig up. All those Players who were killed by the local commoners.”

I shuddered. “So you’re suggesting, all we need to do is go check a few cemeteries, open a few graves and collect the ashes?”

“Not at all,” he hurried to offer the good news. “There’re no cemeteries of that period left in Paris. All the bones were thrown down into the city’s catacombs.”

“Wait a sec. If my memory serves me well, that’s like an infinitillion of graves they emptied down there!”

Arts nodded. “About six million, strewn around an area of almost three thousand acres.”

“That sounds like a lot, don’t you think?”

“That’s why she found *him*,” Litis glanced at Arts as he poured himself another mug. The bastard! I still hadn’t finished my first one.

I turned to Arts. “Who did you find?”

“Him,” she pointed at a nearby table.

Noticing our stares, a young Archalus began rising from his seat. Arts gave him a barely noticeable shake of the head, and he sat back down.

“What’s that for a feathered wonder?” I asked grimly. I didn’t seem to have any luck with Archali just lately.

“That’s Kafiil. We call him Kaf. He’s a mercenary.”

“So how’s he supposed to help us?”

“That’s easy,” Litius butted in. “The Archali can sense the presence of Kabirids, and vice versa. Dead or alive, doesn’t matter. I've estimated the approximate area where they might be buried. All we need to do is scan it with Kaf and find the sulfur.”

“Talk about the best-laid plans,” I said without taking my eyes off the Archalus.

I couldn’t exactly put my finger on it but I had a bad feeling about him. He was cute, like all those feathered prettyboys. The long black hair made his face appear even more feminine, his arms so skinny they appeared

weak. His right wing stuck unnaturally to one side; I could tell it had been broken and knitted incorrectly.

I activated Insight and checked him out again.

Kafiil

???
Renegade
???

“Tell me about him,” I asked Arts, keeping my eyes on him.

“He fought for the Archali but had a problem with his commander, apparently. I didn’t quite get it. He either deserted or they kicked him out, I’m not sure.”

I compared her words with what I’d just seen. “He deserted.”

“That’s how he ended up in Cesspit. He accepts all jobs regardless of the karma. But no hit contracts. He’s not a hitman, take a look.”

I did. I put on the Avatar mask and saw a weak gray haze rising up from him. Which mean he was Dark — or rather, gravitating to the Dark Side. I removed the mask.

“How long do you know him?” I asked Arts.

“I’ve never had to work with him,” she replied, “I’ve only heard what others say about him. A few of my friends speak well about him.”

All in all, things seemed to gel together pretty well. A renegade Archalus, complete with a puppy face and a broken wing, who took up any mission for a pittance. I knew I should have bought his sob story hook, line and sinker but I kept getting this bad feeling about it.

“I take it, we don’t have a choice, do we?”

“There’s always a choice,” Arts said. “But if you want us to hold a beauty pageant among potential candidates, that might take a few days. And time is a luxury…”

“…that we don’t have,” I finished her sentence for her. “Very well. What does he want?”

“We haven’t discussed it properly yet. He normally charges a hundred grams a jump but we might come to an agreement.”

“Very well. Call him over.”

She nodded to the feathered kid who climbed awkwardly to his feet. Jesus, he was limping as well. I felt pretty uncomfortable about my doubting him.

“Hi,” he said with a light bow.

“Come sit down,” I said, wistfully watching Litius pour the remaining beer into his mug. I wasn’t really greedy but he shouldn’t be drinking like this. “Do you know what the mission implies?”

“Your girlfriend — oh, your friend — oh — this lady here,” the Archalus pointed at Arts, “said we might need to go to Lutum.”

“To do what?”

“I suppose you want me to steal some charmed artifact or other. And the first person who takes it in their hands will be cursed. Which is why you need me. Am I right?”

“No, not exac- Wait a sec. You mean you would agree to something like that?”

“Players like myself are used to it. Also, curses tend to weaken over time.”

“There’s no curse involved. We just need to find something. And we need an Archalus to do it. You guys can sense Kabirid presence, can’t you?”

“I’m not going to fight any of those Kabirid bats,” Kaf’s voice filled with fear.

“Don’t worry. The kind of Kabirid bats we’re talking about aren’t interested in Archali anymore. They’re more interested in maggots.”

“Grave robbing?” Kaf asked warily, the fear in his eyes replaced by concern. “We are going to discuss it before we close the deal, aren’t w-”

“In your dreams,” Arts cut him short. “Stop your scheming nonsense. This is a scout contract. Don’t even think of fixing us with negative karma for grave robbing.”

“Hey, hey, hey, I only asked!” Kaf threw up both his hands appeasingly in front of him. “I don’t think it’s gonna be a problem. I’m hated by both Kabirids and Archali, anyway. An extra grave won’t really matter. So you want to hire me as a scout?”

“A scanner, rather.”

“In that case, let’s discuss my fees,” he said, looking each one of us pleadingly in the eye as he spoke. “I would like… a hundred and fifty grams for my services. A down payment of a hundred and another fifty after the mission.”

I mentally converted it to rubles and gasped. He didn’t want much, did he? I might have to bring this little angel back on earth.

“From what I heard, this isn’t your usual fee. We’re gonna pay you a hundred grams. Half of it now and the other half once the job is done.”

“Deal,” he agreed with unexpected ease.

The expression on Arts’ face was the silent equivalent of a facepalm. That’s when I understood that he’d had me, curbing any potential attempt at bargaining on my part. By demanding 150 grams, he’d been bluffing all along.

I tried to suppress any irrelevant emotions, feeling my neck turn hot and crimson. Just forget it, I said to myself. You should think about Traug. Think about him.

“Deal,” I said. “Here, take it.”

I poured fifty grams of dust onto the table. Kaf hurried to scoop it up, as if afraid we might change our minds.

“Very well,” I said. “Time to get going. We need to get to Paris as fast as we can. See Paris and hopefully not die! What do we do next?”

“We take the Gates to Londinium,” Litius said, “then rent a flyback to Lutum.”

“Why? Can’t we get there directly?”

“They’re on a maintenance break now. The Gates of Lutum will only reopen in four hours’ time. It’s one in the morning there now — which means that we’ll only arrive there at daybreak. And we still need to get down the catacombs and find the sulfur.”

“Wait a sec. Do you want to say that some Gates actually *close*?”

Arts shrugged. “Sure. It’s normal. About ten years ago, we noticed a drop in Gatekeepers’ numbers here in Cesspit. So some neighboring Gates had to switch to a rota. Gatekeepers won’t tell us why. What do you want?

This is Cesspit! Something like this would have been unthinkable in a place like Mechilos or even Ullum.”

“Okay, okay. Londinium it is. Let’s get going!”

The weather outside must have been way below zero, judging by the tingling sensation in my nose and cheeks. Even I could feel it, not to mention all the others. Litius wrapped his jacket tighter around himself and stuffed his tail between his legs. Arts rushed forward, almost running, while Kaf hobbled along, trying to keep up.

Very nice, I thought. The least they could do was wait for the poor cripple.

The Gatehouse was quiet like a mosque on an Easter night. Normal. The rumors of the Darkest One’s death had spread fast, even though there hadn’t been many people to spread it: both Litius and Arts had been locked up, and Hunter wasn’t the blabby type. The only other eyewitnesses were the antalopes. Most likely, the Seers must have divined it somehow, just like they had when I’d killed the Chorul. Oh. I still had those Choruls to sort out. Never mind. At the moment, rescuing our hapless grave robber was our top priority.

“You don’t need to empty your pockets when you use the Gates to jump within one world,” Arts said, watching me pull out my phone and wallet. “Your stuff will be all right. It’ll only disappear when you travel between worlds.”

Good news. Excellent, in fact. Otherwise all these jumps would have cost me a fortune in socks and boxers. This way at least I could travel planet Earth in my own undies.

I walked over to the massive book and started leafing through it, studying the lists of all local destinations. Had it not been for the places’ human names in brackets next to their Game ones, I’d have never worked

out any of them. Moscow turned out to be Cyrillia, Lisbon was Olissipo and Athens, Aegis.

Finally I found Londinium and whistled in amazement. 26 grams per person! That was 104 grams for all of us.

My eyes filled with greedy tears as I dished out the right amount. We stood around the Gate and held hands as I uttered the name of our destination.

I sensed a soft jolt to my chest. We'd arrived.

This time I noticed the change. Not visually because the Gatehouse here was a carbon copy of our own. But the smell here was different: a humid, spicy blend reminiscent of an exotic sauce.

"Judging by the map I acquired specially for this purpose," Kaf said, "the flyback depot shouldn't be too far away. It's in the Royal Mews in Buckingham Palace. All we need to do is cross St. James's Park and… wait a sec, I might need a moment to work it out."

"Or even better, we might need someone who's been here before," Arts headed for the exit without waiting for any of us. "Are you coming or are you waiting for this Pied Piper to make up his mind?"

None of us were prepared to wait, not even Litius. We left the Community via some side alley and walked a little down it into the open.

The view made my jaw drop.

Before me lay an embankment complete with the Thames rolling its unhurried waters past us. The gigantic, impossibly blue wheel of the London Eye towered nearby; the lights of Big Ben's clock face winked at us from the opposite direction.

“Shut your trap before you catch a British cold,” Arts said. “We’re not here to gawk. You’ll do all the sightseeing you want some other time. Let’s go, quick.”

I obeyed; still I was not so much walking as moving on autopilot staring at all the famous landmarks around me. The jump itself hadn’t been a problem; I’d traveled to Purgator before. It was the sheer contrast between my own little town and this famous English city. I just hadn’t been prepared for this kind of cultural shock.

Despite the late hour, I could somehow hear Russian speech all around us. It took me some time to realize that it wasn’t due to the Londoners’ exceptional polyglot talents; it was my own Linguistics skill kicking in, allowing me to understand everyone around.

I pulled out the True Mirror and inconspicuously checked myself. My baggy trench coat was now slim with plenty of buttons — apparently in keeping with the latest local trend. My old pants were now a tailored pin-stripe brown tweed affair; my winter boots had turned into a nice pair of Oxford brogues. Shame my face remained the same. To a Commoner observer, I was still the same lug-eared self — then again, this way I might at least keep a low profile in the crowd.

“Sergei,” Arts’ voice rang with impatience.

“Coming,” I said, realizing they were a good fifty feet ahead of me, including Kaf with his limp.

We walked along a narrow street past some kind of garden — or a park, I couldn’t really tell in the dark — when Buckingham Palace loomed out of the night before us. I recognized it straight away from the TV. The sheer majesty of it, distinct even through the surrounding gloom, pinned me to the spot. I tried not to look at the powerful edifice behind the railing that seemed to go forever, the gates and the guards.

Arts, however, walked over to a man who was standing slightly aside and exchanged a few words with him. She seemed perfectly in her element, as if she'd been living here for quite a while. I tried to take a better look at him but my Insight was of little help:

???

Assistant

???

"Follow me," the assistant finally said. "Just make sure you don't stray. If someone in the palace sees you, you won't be allowed to use this flying platform ever again. Got it?"

We all nodded while I kept staring at the imposing gates. Was someone supposed to open them for us? The Queen's belated visitors, just dropped by to use Her Majesty's very own flying platform! Yeah right!

It turned out to be much simpler than that. The assistant raised his hand, and a transparent dome formed around us. I could sense its presence with my very skin although I couldn't see it. I kept turning my head, peering through the darkness, until Litius whispered,

"This is a mass invisibility spell. It won't fool a Player but it works well against Commoners."

The assistant waved his hand again. This time he wasn't casting a spell, just motioning us to follow him. He headed for the railing and walked right through the ornamental bars. I was even more surprised when Arts did the same, followed by Kaf.

Litius grabbed my hand and pulled me along. "These bars don't exist," he explained. "The whole place has been charmed by a very powerful Illusions master. No commoner will get anywhere near the railing. They'll just walk past without even thinking."

“Please don’t hang around,” the assistant said, heading for a small tower with a clock. He walked through its Doric arch and waved to us, urging us to step up. How long was this supposed to take?

Still, my reservations proved groundless. We were already there. The assistant motioned us inside what must have been the stables, judging by the smell. He didn’t follow us though but returned to his original post in the street outside.

Well, what can I say? “Royal” was the word to describe it. Tall white columns supported the ceiling hung with gilded glass lamps on long chains. I could see a group of Players in livery-like attire talking at the building’s far end. The stables themselves housed wondrous beats which looked like a cross between dragons and force-fed winged lizards.

“What’s this?” I pointed a shaking hand at the one nearest to me.

“That’s a flyback,” Arts replied matter-of-factly.

“How can I help you?” one of the liveried Players walked over to us. According to my Insight, he was a *Master of the Flying Mounts*.

“We need to get to Lutum pretty quick,” Arts said.

“Would you prefer some of our smaller flybacks? They require a down payment but they’re super fast.”

“One of our friends doesn’t have a Riding skill,” Arts said, turning to me. “Which is why we need a carriage for four, and a coachman.”

“That will be dearer but it can be arranged. Twenty-eight grams in total. You’ll need to wait a quarter of an hour while we wake up our biggest flyback and have him harnessed.”

“Sounds good. Sergei, give me the money.”

Still in a state of complete prostration, I handed her the dust. The Master of Flying Mounts gestured at what appeared to be a ginormous boulder. A few liveried coachmen ran toward it and began kicking him awake — rather rudely, in my opinion.

Then I felt sick to the stomach because the giant boulder stirred and opened its eyes with vertical slits of pupils. I'd never been so scared before. Not during the rachnaids' attack, nor when I'd fought the Alpha or even the Darkest One. Then, I'd been at least partly in control. And now…

I slowly turned to the others and said in a quivering voice,

"Sorry, guys. There's no way you can make me fly *this*. Sorry."

Chapter 8

THERE'S ONE SIMPLE WISDOM we normally don't even stop to think about. If you want someone to feel good, make them feel bad first, then restore things to how they were before.

That's exactly what I was thinking while they were literally shoving me into a carriage strapped to the flying beast's back. Not a carriage even: just a glazed wooden box which must have witnessed at least the grandmother of the ruling British Queen.

Only twenty minutes ago, I used to think that our plan wasn't up to much, that the Archalus we'd hired wasn't very trustworthy, and that the whole escapade would only result in thinning out my wallet. Now I desperately wanted to get back to earth and for everything to be as it was before.

Still, I had Litius' strong arms wrapped tight around me while Arts was trying to calm me down, saying that this was a very safe mode of transport. Yeah right. Maybe it was, to some suicidal case who didn't want to leave any trace of his mortal body back on this earth. Whenever the reptile moved, the carriage strapped to its hump began to rock, and us with it. I peered through the glass — which, according to Arts, had been charmed against any damage — watching the earth float by a good ten feet below and trying to suppress the will to throw up. We would have been much better off taking the train!

The coachman was seated in a saddle on the beast's neck while the mage below kept buffing him up with spells — which, according to Arts, made our driver impervious to the elements. Unlike us sitting in a weatherproof cabin, he was completely exposed.

At last, the preparations were over. The beast growled, shaking his scaly head, and trotted forward, picking up speed. He then spread his wings sharply and flapped them a couple of times.

The acceleration pinned me back into my hard seat. When I'd recovered from the initial shock, I peered through the glass again. We were flying! Flying!

Below us, the city glittered with thousands of lights, dissected by the broad black ribbon of the river. From this height, the famous London Eye appeared no bigger than a cartwheel.

I was just beginning to get a grip when a strange thing happened. The beast's body began to tremble as if electrocuted. Everything around me came to a standstill. I heard a popping sound. My ears became blocked, so I didn't understand straight away what was happening. I tried to take another look at the city but it was gone. Only when I'd completely recovered did I realize that all I could see now was the stars, the moon and the water below.

"What the hell was that?"

"Flybacks are teleporting dragons. They're the result of many centuries of meticulous selection, experiments with dust and the hard work of their mahouts," Litius pontificated like a tour guide who'd cornered a stray tourist. "At least that's what encyclopedias say here in Cesspit. But I think that they've always been like that. Not all of them maybe, but at least a certain group, like a new branch in their evolution. As they fly, they excrete noradrenalin which in turn promotes the production of a new substance which assists teleportation. Before, we used to think that teleportation by flybacks was of the same nature as using actual Gates but the Order of Alchemists disproved this."

"Litius, I already got it. Flybacks are dragons capable of teleportation," I stopped him, unable to take my eyes off the black surface of the water below. "It's just magic, pure and simple."

“But it has a more scientific explanation,” Litius said, dispirited.

“Litius, as far as I’m concerned, this is magic. End of story.”

Once again the window panes began to vibrate. A brief spasm ran through the dragon’s body as we teleported again. Now I could see the ground below: the meandering ribbon of a little river, the straight line of a railway track reaching for the horizon and a small stretch of woods.

Another monstrous dragon flew toward us. It was slightly smaller, the carriage on its back half the size of ours. It only held one Player who gave us a long, intent look. He had a rather ordinary appearance — possibly even Slavic. His cropped white hair was his only distinguishing feature: not blond but the color of Alpine snow. He flashed past so quickly that I didn’t even get the chance to get a good look at him.

Still, when our eyes accidentally met, I sensed an inexplicable anxiety. This is the kind of feeling a lamb must get when he sees the knife hidden behind his owner’s back: the knife which will soon slit his throat. I would have liked to have put it down to my paranoia, had it not been for a new system message:

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Intuition ability.

“This leg of the trip is a bit longer,” Arts said. “The next jump will be the last. We’ll port within five hundred yards from the flying platform.”

Everybody in our carriage fell silent. Even the talkative Litius who’d just been impatient to reveal all the world’s secrets to me was pensively looking down. The constant rocking almost put me to sleep, but I was jolted awake by the dragon’s sudden shaking. I heard another soft popping sound.

An avalanche of light assaulted my eyes. The wide streets of the city below resembled bright streams of magma. The famous tower rose on the horizon, almost consumed by the surrounding light. Still, the driver steered

our flyback to the left toward a darker part of the city. A few more shadows flashed past us. More flying dragons!

“Seven minutes,” Arts said, glancing at her phone screen. “Quicker than by plane.”

I didn’t bother to reply, especially because the driver banked our flyback into a tight turn and began to lose altitude. I couldn’t catch my breath. No more flying for me, thank you very much. No more teleporting dragons. I’d rather walk.

Buildings and streetlamps flashed past. The G-forces pinned me back to my seat, crunching my vertebrae and making me bite my tongue. I could taste blood. Dammit!

“So here we are,” Arts said.

I looked out the window. It was pitch black outside. For a while, we continued to rock as the flyback walked unhurriedly, his wings already folded, until he stopped and dropped to his stomach. The driver finally left his saddle, climbed up to us and opened the carriage door. He checked us out and announced,

“We’ve arrived!”

The first thing I did once I’d stepped onto terra firma was bend over and throw up. It just happened — I’d say it felt like the most natural thing to do. Finally I stood up, spitting bile, and gave my friends a guilty look. They just smiled. All of them, even the timid Kaf.

“It’s all right, my friend,” Litius said. “The first time is always like that. Your sense of balance plays tricks on you. You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t intend to get used to it… to… to… any of *this*! You’d better tell me what’s gonna happen now.”

“We need to get to the Avenue du Colonel-Henri-Rol-Tanguy, in the 14th arrondissement. The stables for the snapdrakes must be there.”

‘What, more animals?” I asked, feeling sick again.

“Let’s take a taxi,” Arts said, putting an end to the conflict brewing.

A quarter of an hour later, we were gawking at Paris from the back of a black Citroen. Everybody except me, that is. The transition between cities and countries had been way too fast to have done me any good. Or it might have been the shock of flying a teleporting dragon. A teleporting dragon! It was a good job Tolkien hadn’t lived to see this. He would have turned in his grave.

Which was why all the cozy little streets and broad avenues with few cars and only the occasional tipsy passerby didn’t catch my eye. One of the most beautiful cities in Europe, so what? It still couldn’t compare to my home town’s old embankment, its crumbling fortress, meeting places and its ancient monastery.

We stopped by a large two-story building with an arch in the middle. Arts very conveniently paid the cabman, because I only had dust and Russian rubles on me. We climbed out.

“Over there,” Litius said, tugging at my sleeve.

We walked past the building to a dark green steel pavilion which looked tiny next to it. Litius took a quick look around, approached the padlock on the door and was soon busy with it, turning and clinking something.

“So you’re also a burglar, are you?” I asked.

“It’s not d-d-difficult,” he said, suddenly reverting to his stuttering habit. “It only requires th-th-the knowledge of b-b-basic mechanics.”

“Litius, please don’t get so het up. I’m scared enough as it is.”

“That’s it.”

The steel door creaked, revealing a dark tunnel.

“Why are you all looking at me?” I said. “I’m not going first in there.”

“Me neither,” the Archalus said, stepping back in fear. “I can help you locate the Kabirids’ remains, that’s not a problem, but…”

“Oh, do shut up, for crying out loud,” Arts said, stepping forward.

Litius gave us an accusing look and followed her. Kaf and I almost had to run to catch up with them. I had absolutely no wish to stay outside with the cowardly Archalus — and it looked like the feeling was mutual.

I cast Light and just about made out some black and white columns. My temples felt heavy. The claustrophobic space seemed to close in on me from all sides. It felt like an invisible steel band was digging into my head. The atmosphere down here was quite oppressive. You wouldn’t have thought so: it was just an ordinary underground tunnel like any other. Still, I didn’t feel okay here.

“This is an old and very powerful curse,” Kaf said behind me. “But it can’t harm anyone anymore.”

Oh great. He sure knew how to put one at ease! The very fact that some ancient evil was lurking here gave me the creeps. To add insult to injury, we’d already gone down into the bowels of this tunnel and found the first room. It contained some kind of monument, writings on the wall and a heap of skulls and bones. A curse, he said? I started to get a better idea of its nature now.

“Well?” Arts said, conjuring up a flashlight. “Can you feel anything Kabirid?”

Kaf shook his head. “Nothing. Only humans.”

We continued our journey past the maze of stacked-up human bones and skulls. Admittedly, we occasionally came across more monuments, plaques and even drawings. Still, the overall impression was quite dismal. All those dead souls who’d never found peace even in their graves. In the light of this, one Player killing another could even be seen as merciful: the victim left nothing but ashes behind.

After about half an hour, Arts finally asked, “Do we have to go on much further?”

The girl was a bundle of nerves, and I could quite understand her. Firstly, we’d been walking for quite a while in this badly ventilated space. Secondly, the place’s interior design was quite monotonous: only skulls and bones. And thirdly, if Kaf were to be believed, there was no trace of any Kabirids here.

Now, too, the Archalus shook his head.

“Litius, I think it’s time to admit that your plan has failed miserably,” Arts said grimly.

“So what do you suggest?” I snapped. It was my turn to lose it. “Do you want us to go to Firoll and start smoking demons right and left just to procure some of that stupid sulfur?”

“How the hell do I know? And at the end of the day, who gave you the right to shout at me?”

“Wait a sec! I think I can sense something,” Kaf tensed, turning his head slowly, as if trying to listen or sniff something out. “No, nothing.”

“What are you playing at?” Arts shouted, all but going for him with her fists.

“Wait, I can feel it again. Over there,” he pointed directly at the wall.

“I think I know,” Litius butted in. “The Kabirids’ remains can detect negative energy. They sort of respond to it. Try to say some nasty things to each other.”

“Piece of cake,” I said.

For the next two minutes, Arts and I voiced our differences, followed by a whole list of the same to all those present. Even Traug got his fair share. His ears were probably burning there in his prison cell.

But the Archalus had transformed. Gone was the ingratiating little coward; even his broken wing wasn’t so apparent anymore. He walked unhurriedly to and fro along the wall until he finally stopped, ran his hands over the bones and nodded.

“Are we supposed to move them?” I asked.

“Kaf! Get the hell out of the way!” Arts snapped, still wound-up.

He managed it just in time. Had he not moved, his good wing could have been served up with a nice French sauce. What Arts had used was a regular fireball. Correction: it had been pepped up a little. For a brief moment, the place was flooded with a light so bright that I could see the veins bulge on her forehead. Then we were thrown into darkness again.

“Light,” I mouthed under my breath.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure that her spell would actually work. But our self-appointed wizard was in top form. We studied the resulting yard-wide passage which now connected our tunnel to one of the other corridors. After

only a few feet, we could already stand up in it after a fashion, albeit hunched up. But the most important thing was, this tunnel seemed to have never been accessed before. It definitely wasn't on the tourist trail.

"Yes, yes, it's over there," Kaf nodded vigorously. "It's not very far."

His "not very far" turned out to be a hell of a way. We plodded on for another quarter of an hour, constantly stooping, cussing half-heartedly at each other whenever he told us to (which soon became a hassle), then stopping so that our feathered scanner could focus on his own sensations. And finally…

"Ouch!" Arts recoiled, rubbing her hand.

"What's happe-" Litius jumped back so fast he'd very nearly knocked me off my feet.

"We've arrived," Kaf said with an idiotic smile on his face.

"What's up?" I asked as I got to my feet, still uncomprehending.

I forced my way past them in the narrow tunnel. There was both fear and surprise on their faces. The Archalus peered warily into the void. Arts stood there sucking her finger like a little girl.

I gingerly reached out my hand and immediately snatched it back. It felt as if I'd just touched a hot skillet. I blew on my finger realizing it wouldn't do any good. It felt like it had been burned.

"This seems to be some sort of magic veil," Litius said pensively. "That's both good and bad news."

"What's good about it?" I asked angrily. My finger was throbbing.

“It means that we’ve found the right place. This is where the Kabirids’ remains must be. Fire is their element. So whoever buried the demons here must have set up some sort of protection artifact. And the bad part about it is that we can’t get past it. Had we had a Kabirid with us, he could have just ignored it…”

I wasn’t listening to Litius anymore. As soon as he’d said “protection artifact”, I felt a light bulb switch on in my head, which all but lit up the place — but only until the moment when I reached into my bag and produced Arthall. Its bright blue light dispelled the darkness, revealing a barely noticeable protective veil. I reached out again but felt nothing this time. Guided by some gut feeling, I just carried on walking.

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Intuition ability.

“Sergei!”

I couldn’t make out who exactly was shouting: whether it was Arts or Litius, or all of them together. The veil shrank around me like a piece of old yellowed paper trying to escape the greedy tongues of fire.

Nevertheless, Arthall couldn’t destroy the protection completely. I moved along the wide tunnel, peering at the big blocks of expertly laid masonry. Here, the ceiling was almost ten feet above my head. There must have been another approach to this corridor apart from the one we’d just taken. Otherwise, how could the demons have gotten through to here?

As soon as I found myself in a large round room, I could finally take a better look at my surroundings. It was a crypt of some sort, built by Kabirids for Kabirids just in case someone might get nostalgic enough to visit it many centuries later. But I discovered no trace of any such curious intruders, judging by the thick layer of stone dust. What I did discover were sixteen open sarcophagi arranged around a central pedestal with some kind of glittering artifact placed on it.

I walked over to the nearest stone coffin. The hand of time had left its unforgiving mark on it. The corpse's clothes had crumbled to dust, revealing a powerful skeleton. The epee lying on top of it seemed to have oxidized, so thin that it could fall apart the moment you touched it.

The only thing that seemed still in one piece was a large skull topped with two massive tusk-like horns. I got the impression that its empty eye sockets might light up any moment and that the corpse might ask me what the hell I was doing in here. It was an interesting place, of course. Where else can you see a burial of Kabirid commoners who'd ignored the Game and just lived a normal life here in Cesspit?

Shuddering, I shrank back from the demon who had finally found peace. I then checked all the other sarcophagi but they were all the same, the sole difference being that some remains were hard to even discern. Apparently, they'd suffered so much during that massacre all those centuries back that there had been nothing left to actually bury.

But that wasn't what worried me. How about the Devil's Sulfur? Where was it? I hadn't seen a single gram of it yet. Could I be searching in the wrong place? Either that, or this was the final get-together of some ordinary Kabirids. In which case, why were they guarded so closely? Weird.

In any case, I needed Litius to take a look at all this. The one-winged angel too, might have an idea or two. The only problem remained, I had to somehow switch off that wretched Eye of Sauron or whatever it was.

I walked over to the pedestal and froze in place, unable to take my gaze off the artifact. Something dark stirred inside my heart, lingering, then shank back into the deepest recesses of my soul, leaving a whole bundle of emotions behind.

This didn't feel like exaltation — more like an impotent fury caused by an unfair but deadly offense. I felt like growling, ripping my enemies' flesh with my teeth, tasting their blood, screaming in ecstatic rage.

My hand shaking, I reached out to the artifact. A soothing warmth caressed my palm. It didn’t burn; I knew it couldn’t hurt me. The stone had been waiting for me all this time.

I peered at it, making out a few brief lines:

Karthall (Divine Stone)

It looks like you’ve already met.

The artifact began to vibrate, which felt very pleasant. Then it expired, leaving me in pitch blackness with nothing but my very confused thoughts for company.

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Chapter 9

AS THEY SAY, two heads are better than one. Provided you're not an ogre, of course. Now, too, the old adage had proved correct. To all my complaints that my trip to the burial had resulted in exactly nothing (I expertly evaded any mention of the protection artifact), the Archalus replied with a crooked smirk. He pulled out a bastard sword, walked over to the nearest sarcophagus and sank it into the corpse's skull. He rummaged inside it, then raised his open hand full of some mustard-color dust.

"An Angel's sword!" Arts said wistfully.

'The Devil's Sulfur!" Litius echoed.

"Their brains don't decay completely?" I asked, trying to work it out.

"Not quite," Litius replied. "Although sulfur accumulates inside their skulls, it doesn't affect the demons' mental properties. But it does affect their magic skills. Which is why, once a Kabirid dies and his body decays…"

"Litius, I already got it. The sulfur is inside their skulls. Quit droning. Kaf, how much is there?"

The Archalus walked over to me and poured the dust into my own hand.

Devil's Sulfur

Ingredient

2 grams

“Excellent,” I said. “Now we need to check-”

Arts’ hand covered my mouth. “Don’t say anything if you don’t want your karma to drop.”

“You’re the one who hired Kaf, so all your orders will affect your own karma, not his,” Litius explained.

“I know, I know,” I said, transferring the sulfur into the bag. “I’m just a bit restless, so I forgot. Okay. In that case, each of us should do as they please.”

“I got it,” the Archalus said, cleaving another skull with his sword like an overripe melon.

My worst reservations proved ungrounded. It looked like this was indeed the last resting place of the demonic top brass. Only five of the Kabirids didn’t have any sulfur in their heads. Even so, they did have some but it was so filthy and mixed with decaying bones that there was no way we could use it. But all the others had yielded a gram or two each which brought our diabolical pickings up to sixteen grams — more than we needed.

Arts walked over to me. “What about the protection artifact?” he asked quietly.

“Why, what about it?”

I sensed something within me that protested against me talking with her. I wanted to hide my divine stones away from prying eyes so that I never had to show them to anyone, let alone talk about them.

“Did you take it?” she insisted.

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” a stranger within me said, using my voice. “We need to go, anyway. We’ve found everything there was to find.”

I tried not to look her in the eye. It felt awful. On one hand, they were my friends. With certain reservations, but still. On the other, I had seen their eyes when I’d shown Arthall to them: their greedy, envious eyes. All of them had wanted to have it for themselves, each and every one of them.

Arts kept her gaze firmly on me but I pretended not to notice. Soon Litius and Kaf joined us, and we set off on our return journey. If the truth were known, I would have never found my way back in this maze of tunnels, but both Arts and Litius had the Map-Making skill which proved crucial in this situation. No idea how it worked but according to my friends, we were moving in the right direction.

Then Litius stopped dead in his tracks, pricking his ears. “Switch off the lights,” he raised a warning hand. “All of them!”

Arts’ flashlight went out. I disabled Light. A tense Archalus was rustling his wings behind me. Litius drew in the air, sniffed like an indignant cat and went quiet again. He kept silent for a good minute, then said grimly,

“Humans. Coming from the same direction as we came. Two of them.”

Arts cringed. “Probably, gendarmes. The night guard must have seen the door open and called them. Shame we only have one exit. And they have guns.”

“I wish Harph was with us. He could have gone and found out.”

“A rat!” the girl all but screamed but Litius covered her mouth just in time.

Just look at her! She was one hell of an experienced Player and a fighter to match, riding flying dragons before breakfast, and she was scared of the most primitive of rodents!

That's when it dawned on me. "Most primitive" was the key word.

I checked my mana level and heaved a sigh of relief. It had partially restored already. It was a good job I'd only cast Light twice! As a result, I had enough for my purposes.

Slowly so as not to scare the little rodent away, I reached out to it and cast Talking With Lower Animals. Nothing happened, if you didn't count the light whiff of green smoke escaping my fingertips.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 1.

The green trail promptly dissolved in the air. Did it work or it didn't? Never mind. Let's try it.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes," the rat's voice was thin like that of a little girl.

"There's a small passage further down this tunnel. It leads to a big hall. That's how we came here. There're some people there," I tried to speak in simple, choppy sentences. "I want you to find out where they are and what they're doing. Think you can do that?"

The rat swished its tail by way of answer, then scurried off in the right direction. My comrades stared at me like some wild African tribe staring at a spacesuited astronaut who'd just landed.

Finally, Arts removed Litius' hand from her mouth. "What the hell was that now?"

"Nothing. I was telling the rat to go do some recon."

“You *what*?” the girl’s eyes filled with silent astonishment.

“Just something I got from some good Samaritan the other day. It’s called Talking With Lower Animals. Now I can understand the language of all sorts of little critters. So I just tried it out. Shame there’s no such spell for understanding human beings.”

“You should teach me,” Arts’ eye lit up like two big gas hobs. “Once we’re back, I want you to buy the Mentoring skill…”

She didn’t get the chance to finish because my little furry protégé came scurrying back. He rose to his hind legs as if mimicking human manner and reported,

“Two of them… standing with their backs to me… by a tall, lean stone… light coming out of their hands… they’re looking at it…”

“A ‘tall, lean stone’ is probably a column,” I said. “Thank you very much. You can go now.”

I repeated the rat’s report to the others.

“What could they be looking at? Litius asked.

“Does it matter?” Arts whispered. “The main thing is, they’re standing with their backs to the exit. We really should use this opportunity. Wait here. I’ll call you.”

Without waiting for an answer, she darted off into the darkness. We didn’t even get the chance to say anything. I could rewind time, of course, but by then, I wasn’t really sure. Was it worth it? Arts seemed to know what she was doing. Should I just leave her to it?

A crashing noise came from the passage, making me doubt the wisdom of my decision. A cloud of stone dust showered us from above,

threatening us with a rockfall. Luckily, it didn't come to that; and after a while, I heard Arts' voice from a distance,

"Come quick! They're flat out!"

The three of us hurried toward her. I tried to cast Light. As if! My mana was at zero.

Instead, Litius summoned some kind of glowing sphere which he hung in mid-air. Now we could make out the gendarmes lying on the floor as well as Arts who looked utterly pleased with herself.

"Did you kill them?!"

"Nah," she shrugged. "I just cast an advanced Telekinesis."

"Think you can teach me?"

She shook her head. "It requires level 40 Mysticism. It's easier to buy a basic one in any shop."

"Hey, how ab-b-bout we g-g-get out of here first and you d-d-discuss your nonsense later?"

"Our Whiskas-loving friend has a point, I'm afraid. Let's get moving," Arts said, heading for the exit.

"What makes you think I like Whiskas? What kind of insinuation is that?" Litius protested as he trotted after her.

Kaf and I had to hurry to keep up with those two blabbermouths. Admittedly, I felt relieved to leave the claustrophobic underground dungeons behind. It was as if I could finally breathe freely. Even my head went round as if it had been constricted for a long time.

"*Ne bougez pas! La police arrivera bientôt!* "

A slightly overweight man of about forty-five years old — the night guard, most likely, — was standing by the gendarmes' van which was flashing a full set of rooftop lights. It was a good job they hadn't activated the siren: how would that have been for a street show!

"What did he say?" I asked Litius. French wasn't on my Linguistics skill list.

"He says, we should stay where we are. The police are coming."

"So what do we do?"

"One thing we won't do is wait for them to arrive," Arts said, stretching her hands in front of herself, palms pointing outwards.

A sudden gust of wind hit our accidental eyewitness, lifting him in the air, and sending him flying a good ten yards, swirling him in the air like a limp ragdoll. The night guard landed on his side spreading his arms wide in an awkward, very childlike gesture. His head hit the curb, and he went limp.

Arts ran over to him, felt his pulse and reached into her bag for a vial filled with an oily golden liquid. She gently opened the man's mouth and poured down the elixir.

I walked over to her. "What's that?"

"Judging by its color and consistency, this is Old Man's Curse," Litius replied instead. "It'll make him forget everything that had happened to him in the last five minutes before he drank it."

"It can be very useful against a Player's exposure to commoners," Arts added, putting the vial away.

"Won't we have problems with Gatekeepers?"

“The gendarmes didn’t see me. I attacked them from behind. This guy has already forgotten everything he’s seen. And don’t forget we haven’t killed anyone, either. So no, I don’t think Gatekeepers will be a problem… that’s it, all done. We can go now. I suggest we walk a couple of blocks and hail a cab.”

Litius seemed to know the city better than any of us. Earlier, he’d taken a good look at the interactive map, so now he could probably qualify as a professional guide. For that reason, we let him lead us. Despite his limp, Kaf tried to stick close to him. He also apparently wanted to get as far away from here as possible. As we walked, Arts cast a couple of anxious glances at the night guard, but she showed no intention of hanging around the “crime scene”, either.

But me, I had a momentary lapse of attention. Or rather, my phone had distracted me. Luckily, I’d switched it to vibrate. So when it went off in my pocket, I mechanically pulled it out.

It was a message from Julia,

Will we see each other soon?

Where did she think she was going so early? To school? *Today*, I typed as I walked.

As I did so, I stumbled. The phone went flying from my hand and hit the tarmac. Fortunately, it didn’t break because it landed on its back, even the screen was spared.

But as I bent over to pick it up, I glimpsed the figure of a man behind me, lurking in the shadow of one of the houses.

I stood up and turned to face him. A shiver ran down my spine. It was the same stranger whom we’d seen on our way here flying in the opposite direction. From Paris to London. You just couldn’t mistake the

white hair and slightly contemptuous gaze. Why had he come back to this city? Why the hell was he either following me or one of my friends? And at the end of the day, who was he?

I had a shedload of questions to ask him — but I somehow doubted that this white-haired guy would be happy to answer any of them.

“Hey, what’s keeping you?” Arts shouted as she reached the crossroads.

“Coming,” I said. And when I turned round, all I saw was the man’s back. He must have decided that I’d had enough of him for today. What a strange unpleasant individual.

All of a sudden, I was worried. What if he reported us to the Gatekeepers? As far as I or Litius was concerned, we had nothing to fear. But Arts?..

As I plodded along on rubbery legs, I tried to figure out what the consequences for her might be for attacking commoners. Did Gatekeepers even understand the concept of a suspended sentence? I really didn’t want her name to appear one fine day on the bulletin board under a death sentence.

Stop it, I said to myself. I was really winding myself up, imagining things. First of all, I needed to speak to her.

But I didn’t get the chance until we’d finally entered the local Community. Which admittedly looked nothing like ours. The Parisian Players had bought a large four-story mansion and set up their center in it. The first and second floors were taken up by all sorts of quirky little shops, their long corridors lined with signs offering all kinds of services. A hotel occupied the whole of the third floor. And as for the fourth floor, they’d broken out some of the doors and partitions to set up a restaurant which also served as the Syndicate.

As opposed to ours, their bulletin board was huge, hung with all kinds of missions. Tiny round tables, waiters in bow ties and tails… and lots of Players, of course.

"Kaf, you've done yourself proud keeping your part of the deal. Here's your fifty grams and another twenty-five for the return fare."

"Thanks a bunch," the Archalus scooped up the dust and bowed for some reason. "If you don't need me any further, I'll be off."

"Sure."

I looked at our fine-feathered friend as he left, thinking how mistaken I'd been about him. He seemed to be a regular guy.

"Litius, I'll pay you off a bit later once we've sold the eggs."

The beastman nodded.

"Now," I said, "I want to tell you about who I just met by the catacombs."

The whole thing only took me a couple of minutes, mainly because I knew virtually nothing about the white-haired guy. Judging by my friends' focused demeanor, they found the information quite important.

"Could it have been a mugger?" Arts thought out loud.

"Possible," Litius replied. "In that case, why didn't he attack us? The moment was right."

"What's a mugger?" I asked.

"Muggers are Players who get hired to initiate commoners," Arts replied. "They capture a Player and take him to a previously arranged place

where the commoner's already waiting to kill him. Alternatively, they kill their victim themselves. Either way, the commoner becomes a Player."

"I thought that commoners knew nothing about Players?"

"They do and they don't," Arts scratched her forehead. "Despite the Gatekeepers' express orders, you can't hide a pig in a poke. Players have large families and lots of friends, and not all of them can keep their mouths shut. Some muggers prefer to work online, creating websites where they offer super abilities for hire, so their clients often won't even see them before the actual initiation. They pay by bank transfer. Sometimes they get ripped off but sometimes the mugger actually sticks to his end of the bargain."

Litius shook his head. "That's not a mugger. Muggers only attack weaker players who are alone, preferably newbies. And there were three of us there."

"Yes, it's very strange," the girl said.

The awkward silence was broken by a waiter whose prompt arrival surprised us as much as a snow blizzard in January surprises municipal snow removal teams.

"Have you made your choice?"

He had a point. We'd been sitting here for the last five minutes without ordering anything.

Litius shook his head straight away; Arts was so lost in thought he hadn't even noticed the waiter's arrival. By contrast, I cheered up.

"What do you recommend as an aperitif?"

"If you just want something refreshing, I would recommend a Montrachet, quite a light white wine. If you prefer something stronger, you

could take a Pinot de Charente. If there're any cider lovers amongst you, we have Pommeau de Normandy which is actually a mix of cider and calvados. As far as Armagnacs are concerned, I'd recommend Floc de Gascogne. But if you'd prefer a really strong liqueur, we could arrange a bottle of Grande Chartreuse."

"Could you bring us each a small glass of everything, please? On second thoughts, make it a large glass."

The waiter sized me up with a knowing expression. Still, he nodded and scurried off.

"Sergei, it's not really the right moment to get off our faces," Arts commented, finally coming out of her trance.

"You don't understand. To come to France and not to try any of their famous wines is a crime."

Soon the waiter came back and began setting up the bottles in front of me. He'd also brought us some chocolate, grapes, sugar lumps and some kind of crackers.

"I'd recommend eating a few grapes after the white wine," he explained. "After the Armagnac, a piece of chocolate… no, wait, it's too strong. I suggest you start with Montrachet."

I tried every single drink, casting ingratiating looks at the water to make sure I was doing it right. From time to time, he nodded or corrected me. I took a tiny sip of everything, literally tasting the flavors on my tongue.

"Tell us about the liqueur, please. What's it made from and how do they make it?"

'We don't call it a liqueur, sir. It's rather an elixir. Its original recipe was developed in 1605…"

“Did you really need that flippin’ liqueur?” Arts grumbled once we were outside again.

“I did. I might try and brew some when I get home. It cost us peanuts, anyway.”

That was true. The whole tasting session complete with the waiter’s recommendations had only cost us 7 grams of dust. A derisory sum for the pleasure of being introduced to proper culture. And I wasn’t even tipsy.

“You’d better tell me where the Gatehouse is,” I asked her.

“Over there,” she pointed at a one-story building.

Of course. I should have noticed it myself.

I produced the True Mirror. The Gatekeeper’s lodge was squeezed between the commoners’ houses. This was an old building, clearly part of an historical heritage. Strangely enough, to a commoner’s eye it appeared to have two stories although in reality its roof was not even fifteen feet high.

I turned to my team. “You guys stay here. The commander of Virhort didn’t see you, so there’s no point you sticking your necks out now. Go back to the community and wait in the Syndicate. I’ll just pop over to Virhort and come right back. Hopefully, with Traug. Arts, take my phone, wallet and the keys. You can give them back later.”

Strangely enough, they didn’t object. I’d already noticed that the Game seemed to narrow down our options, cutting out everything superficial. For instance, there was no such notion here as making small talk or doing things out of politeness. Neither Arts nor Litius were looking forward to a trip to Virhort — firstly, because they didn’t want to, and secondly, because they could see I’d made sense. I wasn’t going there to wage a war, after all; all I had to do was hand over the sulfur and bring Traug back. Provided things went according to plan.

I handed my stuff to the girl and crossed the road. Just as I pushed the door open, I saw an elderly lady standing in front of the Gates, draped in lots of strange-looking necklaces. She nodded a greeting to me, forcing me to reply in kind.

“Wastelands,” she said. The dust she’d placed into the Gatekeeper’s hands whirled upwards, enveloping her, and disappeared together with her. One moment she was here and the next moment she was gone, leaving only a few flakes of dust floating to the floor.

My own trip was nothing to write home about. My jump to Purgator proved to be perfectly mundane. I only rearranged my pants, feeling the prickly wool rubbing against my particularly tender bits. I really needed to sort this problem out ASAP before I got myself a nasty rash. How was I supposed to explain to a dermatologist that I was allergic to teleport travel?

It seemed to be quite busy outside. Players hastened past, some of them running. A group of them were gathered noisily nearby; I could hear shouting by the community gates. So that’s where I headed.

To my surprise, I found two guards by the gates. One was human, the other one local — orange-skinned and poorly dressed. Both wore identical breastplates and were armed with halberds. It was those two who made all the racket, shouting their heads off:

“Quick, quick! The gates are about to close!”

I could see some commoners in the crowd — the timid Purgs I’d noticed during my first visit. I had to elbow my way against the crowd’s flow in order to get to one of the guards.

“Excuse me, sir? What’s going on?”

“The Kabirids are here,” he pointed downhill. “They’re about to storm the city.”

I looked outside. A Kabirid army lined up in neat close ranks a few hundred feet away from the city wall. All of them in full armor, their bat wings fitted with sharp steel ends. Many-headed dogs, at least ten foot tall, strained at their chains in front, barely contained by several Kabirids each.

“It’s all gonna kick off in a moment,” the guard said. “All hell’s gonna break loose. It’s at least two hundred bats we’ve got there.”

I didn’t hear his last words very well because I’d already dashed uphill toward the castle. There was no telling what the Archali might do to their prisoners once they’d realized they were fighting a losing battle.

Because angelic blood might really flow today, by the looks of it.

Chapter 10

ALREADY IN THE LAST CENTURY, the Canadian Laurence J. Peter had pronounced his famous principle, stating that “in a hierarchy every individual tends to rise to his level of incompetence.” Before, I’d always tended to view it as a funny joke. Only now had I understood how right the man had actually been.

Putting it mildly, the Archali top brass didn’t jump at their chance to shine. Some of them just froze in place, their faces masks of fear. Others spat out direct orders in hysteria-tainted voices. But that was here on the lower walls. The angelic HQ must have been set up in the castle busy working out its defense tactics. Me, I was on my way to get there — which I finally did, much to my own surprise.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 6.

Big deal! True, it hadn’t come easy: by the end, I wheezed and gasped like a beached whale. I wouldn’t want another interval jogging session like this in a hurry. It took me quite a while to regain my breath in order to speak. When I could finally form a few words, I said to the guard posted by the castle gates,

“I need to see the Commander.”

“Human, are you nuts? Can’t you see what’s going on here?”

“I need to enter!” I thundered in a voice which would have terrified anyone, myself included. The Archalus guard hesitated but stayed put.

I had no time to wait for him to make up his mind. I drew the knife and lunged at him. Which was rather cocky of me because the guard stepped back and bared his spear.

Never mind. We'd taken fortresses stronger than theirs.

[∞]

I ducked under the spear shaft, closed in on the Archalus and pressed the knife blade to his throat. He gulped nervously; I sensed the blade touch his Adam's apple. The second guard started in our direction but I stopped him with a single movement:

"If you get any closer, he's dead. Now you: turn round. Don't do anything stupid or I'll slit your throat. Good," I waited for my hostage to turn his back to me, grabbed him by the base of his wing and brought the knife to it. "If you move, you'll only be able to fly in your sleep. This is moon steel, in case you didn't notice."

"I did."

You could hammer ten-inch nails in with his voice. The amount of hatred seething in it rivaled that of two girls who'd shown up at a wedding in identical outfits.

The second guard kept his eyes firmly upon us, so in the end I had to put the fear of God in him, too:

"Step back five paces. If you start playing a hero, your friend here will never be a good angel again. And you, move it!"

I'd already realized that I was now deep in it. There was no way back: it was sink or swim. Honestly, I had no idea how we were supposed to even enter the castle. That was the easiest place for them to capture me. And even before that, I still had to cross the courtyard which was now teeming with Archali. If they attacked me all at once, my three remaining time rewinds would be of little help.

“Harness the gryphons!” I heard as I walked through the gates. “We can’t let the Cerberi demolish the wall!”

Their clamor filled the courtyard. Still, soon we started to attract attention. Situations like these make you realize that popularity is hugely overrated. It’s a terrible feeling when an entire busy square goes dead quiet and all eyes turn to you. Unkind eyes, mind you, ready to cast a nasty spell or pull out a javelin out of their invisible inventories.

Still, Lady Luck seemed to be on my side, as I heard Commander Vifeil’s voice which thundered over the courtyard like an avalanche,

“What the hell’s going on here?”

I didn’t see him: the guard I’d captured was a big guy, and his widespread wings completely blocked my view. I had to hold him slightly back and rotate him a little, steering him manually, so to say.

“Commander,” I said, “I’ve come to discuss our agreement. But they wouldn’t let me in.”

“So you decided to take one of my guards hostage?”

“I wouldn’t have hurt him,” I pushed my prisoner slightly away from myself, just to illustrate my words. He took a couple more steps, swung round and drew a sword out of nowhere: a standard-issue angelic weapon identical to the one Kaf had used earlier. Which made sense because he’d left his spear by the front gate.

Th circle of feathered creatures around me began to close in.

“We have an agreement!” I shouted.

Vifeil shrugged. “It’s not a good moment, human. Just in case you haven’t noticed, we have a Kabirid threat to contain.”

“We have an agreement!” my voice quivered with passion. “You asked me to bring you ten grams of the Devil’s Sulfur in exchange for my friend. The agreement had no provision for grace time! I’ve brought you the dust. Does the Commander’s word mean nothing now?”

I reached into my bag and showed them the sulfur in my open palm. The local sun played with its color, making it glitter with every shade of yellow, from a deep pear to a light golden. It might have been this glitter that convinced him. Or it could be his Abbas councilor who was now whispering something into the Commander’s ear.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 8.

Your reputation has changed to Vigilante.

“Bring that Korl here,” the Commander finally said.

A couple of Archali dashed for the castle. In the meantime, Vifeil approached me in a laborious heavy gait. He scooped up the sulfur from my hand, tasted it of all things, and nodded. “Where did you get it from?”

“You don’t expect me to give you an answer to this, do you? Not in front of all these witnesses.”

“I just hope you haven’t repeated your Korl friend’s mistake,” he looked deep into my eyes as if seeing all the way through my soul.

I didn’t bother to answer. Pointless trying to lie to him when he had an Abbas — a walking lie detector — standing just next to him. Also, the two Archali had already reappeared, escorting Traug.

Unlike Arts and Litius, Traug was bound hand and foot so he couldn’t make good speed. He wasn’t in a good shape. His unwashed long hair was matted, and the habitual tipsy glint in his eye was gone. A sober Traug is not a pretty sight.

“You okay?” I asked him.

“Not really,” he wheezed. “I’m thirsty as hell. They didn’t let me drink, did they?”

“That’s a lie!” Vifeil thundered. “The prisoner had plenty of bread and water!”

Traug spat on the ground. “You can keep your water, teetotaling bastards.”

The air overhead filled with the rustling of wings as Ilya landed in the courtyard, accompanied by a few buddies of hers. She’d already changed her translucent robes to full armor — and still she looked quite delectable. Her surprised gaze alighted on me for only a moment; then she walked to Vifeil and reported:

“It started.”

“Put the gryphons on the wing! Make sure no Kabirid infiltrates the city!”

I trotted over to him, “Commander? Are we free to go?”

He shrugged the question off. “Just get outta here.”

I hurried to cut through Traug’s bonds, so tight his skin was covered in bruises. He hurried to rub the sore places.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Traug, we need to dash. We have to take cover in the Community. You must run like there’s a pack of rabid dogs chasing after you.”

“Look who’s talking.”

I nodded. We didn’t need to discuss it any further. So we darted off downhill toward the entrance into the mountain. At the moment, that was the only shelter we could afford.

In the meantime, the battle had commenced. The unleashed Cerberi celebrated their freedom, headbutting the city walls which crumbled under their rock-hard foreheads. The first Archali blood had spilt as some of the defenders had proven too slow on the draw. A powerful demonic horde took to the wing behind the Cerberi ranks.

Still, the angelic legion was already speeding through the air to apprehend them. Vifeil led them into battle, his sword enveloped in blue flames. Their gryphons spread their wings, snapping their sharp beaks with impatience. A group of local Archalus commoners charged on toward their death, all of them wannabe players hoping to slay a Seeker and win his or her identity.

The Kabirids’ well-planned attack lasted barely a minute. By the time Traug and I had reached the mountain’s foothill, all hell had broken loose, turning the place into a veritable mayhem. You couldn’t see the sky for all the winged creatures intertwined in their strife. The defeated ones rained to the ground — some silent, others screaming in agony: a blood downpour which showed no intention of stopping.

“Traug, come quick!” I kept shouting even though I couldn’t run any faster myself anymore. My Vigor had long been at zero, blinking a warning red light. But that wasn’t the worst thing. We’d almost made it, anyway. We turned another corner and… and stopped dead in our tracks, facing the Community’s closed gates.

“You bastard!” I shouted, slamming the wood.

“That’s it,” Traug said in a voice that promised nothing good. “Sergei, I want you to stand behind me. It’s not as if we’re gonna live, but at least we can try to sell our lives dearly.”

The truth of his words was immediately confirmed by a burly Kabirid who fought his way toward us past the cordons. He landed on the road below some distance away and tilted his horned head, studying us, then produced a trident and a net out of thin air and began advancing, looking like he'd done it all a thousand times before.

"Shit," Traug pressed his back to the wall. "Sergei, don't let him throw that thing over you."

He didn't have to tell me. I could see that the net was charmed, its filaments changing color under the sun like the iridescent petroleum film on water. This didn't bode well.

Still, I had my own problems to consider as another Firoll visitor had landed on the mountain trail right on top of us. This one was a wannabe commoner — apparently, the Archali weren't the only ones using commoners to plug holes in their personnel numbers.

The second Kabirid lunged at me. His short spear pierced my shoulder, impaling me on its shaft. Looking utterly bored with the sheer drudgery of it all, he lifted me in the air, about to shake me off his spear into the abyss.

I didn't approve of his plan.

[∞]

I crouched and drew the knife. The spear whooshed over my head and thumped against the gate. In two leaps, I was already upon him and struck out at his outstretched hand.

The moon steel didn't let me down, piercing all the way through his weird armor which seemed to be made from a gazillion of tiny crystals. The liquid that gushed from his wound singed my fingers, burning them so badly I nearly dropped the knife.

The Kabirid screamed like a marketwife would at a thief. He tried to pull his spear out of the gate but only made his situation worse because I had no intention of chivalrously waiting for him to retrieve his weapon and defend himself. I thrust the knife into the joint connecting his pauldron to the breastplate, then turned it in the wound.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 12.

By the time he'd managed to work his spear free, it was already too late. The Kabirid's eyes glazed over behind his crystal helmet; all his movements became awkward. He was bleeding like a pig.

By then, I was already behind his back. I locked his head under my arm and slit his throat. See you in hell!

You've killed a Commoner who was hostile to you.

That was the extent of the message. My Karma hadn't suffered, but I'd received no skill or spell bonuses, simply because my opponents hadn't had any. Wretched commoners! The worst thing was, removing his armor proved a job and a half, simply because he showed no intention of crumbling to dust The only thing I gained in the end was his spear:

Ancestral Spear of the Krune Clan

Increased damage to Archali

Decreased damage to humanoids

Minimal damage to Kabirids

My whole body shuddered with the energy overload. I was covered in goosebumps, my veins coursing with what felt like electric current. I needed to get a grip. One day I would be perfectly calm in the heat of a

battle. I'd be killing and slaying without batting an eyelid. One day, maybe. Right now I had our hapless grave robber to rescue.

I shoved the trophy weapon down my inventory and hurried to Traug's rescue. He really could use it. He could barely move: he was forced to stand with his back pressed to the cliff just to make sure the Kabirid couldn't ensnare him in his net. In the meantime, the demon kept attacking him with his trident, looking for my friend's vulnerable spots.

Oh. There was no way I could get close enough to him with my knife. I could have used the spear, I suppose, but with its low damage against the Kabirids it would be of less use than a chocolate teapot. First, I needed to find out this guy's allegiance.

I donned the Avatar and chuckled with satisfaction. I still couldn't get used to the fact that Kabirids could serve Light. And judging by a billowing cloud of white haze he exuded, the guy was an innocent sheep in wolf's clothing. Exactly what my Katzbalger needed. The only question remained, where to aim it.

Traug was having it tough. The Kabirid had already wounded him, so my friend seemed to have abandoned all idea of attacking him. Still, I didn't dash to his aid like a headless chicken. Instead, I watched the demon as he attacked, making a mental note of any potentially vulnerable spots. Firstly, his inner thigh, which seemed to open up conveniently every time he bent down. Secondly, his armpit area. No idea what made me decide to concentrate on it. It's just that the thought of hitting him near his crotch made me shudder. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. So it looked like I might have to dismember him.

I darted off, zigzagging like a chased hare across the entire width of the road. I avoided his trident by pure chance — and lost my balance in the process.

So much for my well-laid plans. I was lying on the road, trapped under his net.

[∞]

This time I dodged to make sure the trident missed me, then stopped dead in my tracks, waving my hands to dampen the momentum. The net dropped to the ground right in front of me. I ran over it toward him and took a swing, intending to slash out at the joint in his armor. Still, the Kabirid proved quicker on the draw than I thought. He flung the trident aside, drew a dagger and parried my blow with it. The moon steel clanged plaintively. The Kabirid let go of the net and went for me.

He was just as dangerous with a dagger; in actual fact, he was suspiciously agile for his burly build. If Hunter hadn't taught me some basic defense, things would have turned sour.

Which they did, anyway. As I backed off, I stumbled over a rock and went sprawling onto my back. Impatient to finish off one of his attackers, the Kabirid lunged at me, pointing his greedy dagger at my chest.

Admittedly, I wasn't a big fan of piercings, decorative or otherwise.

[∞]

As I fell to my back, I managed to stretch out a hand and pushed myself back up. In this position, there was only one spot I could hit. Shuddering, I slashed out at his groin.

How he screamed! He put H.P. Baxxter to shame, I tell you. Blood squirted out of the wound onto the dry rocks while I froze, still crouching, unable to move with shock.

I only came round when I saw a sword piercing the Kabirid's throat.

“Happy now, slimeball?” Traug shouted, apparently pleased with himself.

The question required no answer. The “slimeball” had already dissolved, his ashes spiriting away on some business of their own. I wistfully eyed the generous loot he’d dropped while Traug shamelessly bagged it all.

“Sergei, look, he’s got Devil’s Sulfur on him! That must have been some very special demon. One of Lucifer’s own spawn.”

“You could say that again. He gave me a full dose of his specialness.”

“We need to stash it away before the Archali saw it. They have a nose for this stuff.”

“Why, what can they do?”

“They’ll be all over this place like flies over… er, I’d like to say “over honey” but…”

“But that’s excellent,” I interrupted him. “How much sulfur have you got?”

“Just a gram. That’s all they drop normally.”

I didn’t try to dissuade him. Later, I might tell him about much better places for sulfur mining, right in the heart of the capital of France. Now, however, I just produced all the leftover sulfur I had on me and waited for Traug to add his precious gram to it. Then I just lifted my cupped hands over my head.

In the meantime, the battle had moved over to the castle. Its gates had been smashed open; a couple of Cerberi were already wreaking havoc in the city’s nether districts. I made out some strange skinny creatures

which looked like dogs, only bigger and remarkably repulsive, with red eyes and spiky collars. Their skin hung in tatters.

“Hell hounds,” Traug whispered.

They could be here in less than a minute and a half, by the looks of it. Still, the glistening of the sulfur had already attracted the attention of a few retreating Archali, causing them to freeze in the air in hesitation. Finally, the biggest one of them — the one with the most scars and broken feathers — dove right onto us.

I’d barely managed to put the sulfur back into my bag when *Preceptor* — whatever that was supposed to mean — landed next to me.

“Sulfur,” he said, licking his lips.

“It’ll be yours,” I spat out. “On one condition.”

“Tell me.”

“We need to get into the Community. The only way to do it now is from above,” I pointed. “As soon as you depose us inside, we’ll give you the sulfur.”

He didn’t hesitate for very long. I could already see that my offer was incredibly generous. Still, I valued my life more.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 9.

The Preceptor nodded and turned to his brethren still hanging in mid-air. “Cover me. That’s an order.”

This was one of the rare cases where I had nothing against abuse of authority. The Archalus grabbed us with his arms like two wooden logs, kicked off and shot up upwards.

I definitely wasn’t astronaut material. I clung to our feathered helper for dear life, watching in horror as the earth distanced from under me — and as more Kabirids approached.

It would have been stupid to believe a stunt like this would go unnoticed. Now we were chased by six demons — which luckily were apprehended by the Preceptor’s team. It was by no means an equal fight, but I didn’t get the chance to enjoy it: in a few powerful wingbeats, the Preceptor delivered us to the hole at the mountain top. He stepped into it and plummeted down.

My stomach lurched. Amusement parks weren’t my thing, that’s for sure.

We landed some distance away from the central square. The Preceptor offered me a demanding hand, and I gave him the sulfur. In another brief wingbeat, he headed out, the same way he’d got inside. I wouldn’t be in such a hurry if I were him. It looked like the Kabirids were about to take the castle. With all due respect and sympathy to Ilya and possibly even to Commander Vifeil, they didn’t stand much chance.

“That was smart!” Traug slapped my shoulder so hard he very nearly dislocated it. “I would have never thought of something like that! I thought we were as good as dead.”

“There’s nothing good about it. Not my thing.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We’re getting the hell out of this place. I’ve had your Purgator up to here. It’ll give me indigestion for months.”

Traug grinned. Despite his recent captivity, he was now all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Now he headed for the Gatehouse. I was about to follow when I thought I saw a familiar face.

The funny thing was, the face in question wasn’t supposed to be here. And still it was — heading for the Governor’s mansion, of all places. The person walked over to the front door, opened it as if he owned the place, and walked straight in.

“Traug? Can you wait a second?”

“Why, what’s up?”

“We seem to have another unfinished business here. It won’t take long. We need to pay a courtesy visit to the city’s new Governor. Just to present our compliments and hopefully to get paid what’s due to us.”

Chapter 11

QUITE A FEW GREAT DISCOVERIES were made by accident. Alexander Fleming came across penicillin by sheer chance after he'd forgotten to wash a test plate containing live bacteria. Similarly, Antoine Henri Becquerel discovered radioactivity while studying the phosphorescent effects of uranium salts. And me, I'd just discovered that you should never attempt to enter a stranger's house uninvited.

I can only say that we did knock first. Polite nerd that I was, I knocked on the door, and kept knocking until my knuckles became sore. Then Traug joined in, leaving a couple of nice big dents in the wood. Still, no one seemed in a hurry to greet us — so we just let ourselves in, seeing as he door wasn't locked, anyway.

That's when we walked into another problem. The guy I'd recognized must have been a complete introvert — otherwise why would he have set up a magic trap on his own doorstep? And us, we just walked right into it.

In a blinding flash, a giant fireball rocketed toward us from the opposite wall. No one would have been able to react to it in time. As I activated time rewind, I sensed my hair curl with the heat, forming a warm wooly hat around my head. My skin crackled, turning into a thick juicy crust.

[∞]

I forced myself to think pronto. The moment the wretched front door closed, the BBQ show would begin.

"Traug — down!" I grabbed my uncomprehending partner and forced him onto the floor. The fireball disintegrated in the air without

causing us much harm. Which was good news, I suppose. But just as we climbed back to our feet, a ring of frost appeared in front, spreading toward us. It touched the edge of my trench coat, then frosted my skin. I sensed a deadly cold which was less than pleasant, but the spell didn't seem to have any other effects on us.

Your Resistance skill has increased to level 1.

Traug chuckled. "What are they like? Trying to hurt a Korl with a frost spell! They might just as well send a water mage down here."

He jinxed it, didn't he? No, they didn't send any water mages to fight us — what they did send was water itself. We were showered with a gazillion tiny strangely-shaped droplets which were long and sharp like sewing needles. Traug just stood there legs akimbo with a contemptuous smirk on his face, proud and apparently pleased with himself. But for me it was no laughing matter. That wretched needle rain had stripped me of 30% life! All Korls seemed to have a high resistance to all Water and Frost spells — but apparently, this didn't apply to half-bloods.

Before I got the chance to recover from this last adventure, an electric lightning ball formed right in front of me. That was really the last thing I needed now. I'd run out of time rewinds. So I just gritted my teeth and clenched my white-knuckled fists, digging my nails deep into my own flesh and bellowing like a cow led to the slaughterhouse. What else did you want me to do when I had high-voltage electric current sent right through me?

Your Resistance skill has increased to level 2.

You've reached level 8.

I really wasn't in the mood to celebrate or even distribute the available points. Yes, I was happy that my health had been restored — but my chest still felt constricted so badly that I struggled to breathe. My head buzzed as if infested by a swarm of butterflies. Unless…

I looked up. No, it wasn’t in my head. It was indeed a swarm of tiny fluorites heading toward me — only these ones weren’t cute and cuddly at all, their angry jaws full of tiny but very sharp teeth.

Of course. They hated electricity, didn’t they? For them, this was a party. Having said that… hadn’t Jumping Jack scared them away with light last time? And I had just the thing in my little box of tricks.

I cast Light, pointing it at the closest fluorites. Blinded, they stopped in hesitation and hovered in the air, rubbing their eyes. Excellent. How about those over there?

I started moving my hand like a torchlight. It seemed to be working just fine, had it not been for Traug who, clumsy as usual, managed to upend a small table by the door.

The noise stirred the fluorites back into action. Their little faces distorted into bloodthirsty snarls. The sight was horrible. Their transparent wings whirred as the whole swarm descended upon me. I yelped as their tiny teeth bit right through my trench coat. You’d think it was nothing, but when a dozen of these little critters bit you almost simultaneously, you’d know all about it!

Traug wasn’t having it easy, either. You could say what you want about the fluorites but their lightning attack had cost me 20% life.

“Enough now!” I heard Traug’s voice, followed by a flash. This wasn’t my miserable excuse for a flashlight: the spell he’d cast was more like a surge of light which barreled toward us, sweeping away the fluorites.

“Jack! Is this how you meet all visitors?” I asked, peering at the bite marks covering my skin. It looked like I’d just been attacked by a bunch of microscopic Jack Russells.

“An unbidden guest brings unrest,” Jumping Jack replied, hopping toward us. “Hey you, Korl, mind straightening this up?” he pointed at the table Traug had upended.

“I thought you’d be happy to see us.”

“I don’t like visitors, whether humanoid or beastmen. Mechanoids are the only bunch I don’t mind. They never waste your time. That’s why as soon as those idiots elected me Governor again, the first thing I did was set up visiting hours. Whoever comes at any other time, has to run a small obstacle course.”

“So small it might be the last in your visitor’s life.”

“You had everything you needed in order to complete it. You wouldn’t expect me to set up impossible tasks for you, would you?”

I didn’t say anything, hoping that my meaningful silence spoke louder than words. In the meantime, Jack continued to analyze my recent actions.

“Those were elemental attacks which any experienced wizard should be able to neutralize. Plus the fluorites’ attack which was triggered by the lightning ball. You did the right thing by blinding them with light. Quite a few well-known Players — or some Gods, even — wouldn’t have even thought about it, believing themselves above understanding such inferior creatures. It would have gone really well, had it not been for your Korl friend who was stupid enough to push that table over. One thing that all fluorites hate just as much as they hate electricity is any loud noise. They’ll attack anyone who happens to be next to its source.”

“Is there anything those midges actually like?”

“Not much, really,” Jack agreed.

We fell silent. You could cut the air with a knife, so I tried to defuse the tension. “I killed Pull, didn’t I?”

“Oh yes, oh yes! Honestly, I didn’t expect it from you. Come with me… guys,” he added, glancing at Traug.

We followed him to the familiar room. Nothing had changed here. The table which only recently had been presided over by Pull; the chair where he’d spent the last seconds of his life — torturous, agonizing seconds. The only difference being, the table was now crowded with vials, test tubes, pestles and mortars, distillation retorts, little bottles containing all kinds of colorful liquids, and other alchemic paraphernalia. A large candelabra groaning with brightly lit candles sat at its center. I was about to say that there was no need to waste precious wax with so many fluorites in the house, but I bit my tongue just in time. This passionate environmentalist might not appreciate the joke. I didn’t want any more problems with him.

“Here,” he picked up one of the vials containing the familiar thick acid-orange liquid. “It’s yours now.”

“The Elixir of Power,” I said. I didn’t need to check its stats — I just knew it.

“No idea how you managed to get rid of Pull, but you did. You’ve saved the Virhort Community from a terrible tyrant.”

“Yes, and helped another one to ascend,” I joked, putting the vial into my inventory.

I still had to work out what to do with it. If I drank it now, it would do me little good. First I needed to level up my skills like all normal Players did. Should I sell it? Possible. But in that case, I needed to research its real price so as not to make a fool of myself.

I slid the vial into my bag and looked up at Jack. Only now did I notice the unkind glint in his eye. The kind of glare you give to a bailiff

who’s arrived to seize your property.

“Anything wrong?” I asked.

“You’ve done a great thing by ridding us of Pull. I really appreciate that. But I didn’t ask you for his job.”

“That’s just a nice bonus, isn’t it? I thought you would like it.”

“What’s there to like? They made me leave my cave and brought me to this noisy place where I’m constantly distracted from my experiments!”

That was something I hadn’t thought of. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I’d realized, of course, that Jumping Jack had every chance of winning free elections — the outcome which suited my own ends just fine. That way, everybody in Purgator would have their own piece of cake and eat it too. But I’d forgotten to take his own personality into consideration. My own idea of common good didn’t quite agree with Jack’s idea of comfortable living. He was indeed happier lounging in the magic grove in his cave, surrounded by his fluorite friends. And I’d only just realized it.

“You could have declined. That’s what democracy is about. They can’t force you.”

“Forget it,” he shook his head. “I tried, I really did. But then those idiots decided to come to the cave and started dropping like flies.”

“Which idiots?”

“The electors. They came to ask me to govern the Community. No self-preservation instincts whatsoever! I had to agree, simply to stop them dying.”

His heavy sigh was filled with all the wistfulness of the hapless Purgator people. I even felt a bit sorry for him: because of me, he was now

stuck in a job he hated. I wanted to tell him that half of all Russian men were in the same position, but he wouldn't have understood the analogy. So I just bade my goodbyes.

Jack saw us to the front door. He didn't ask us to pop by whenever we had the time or the need for his help.

"May your journey never end," he said to our backs, "and let's just hope I never see you again. And even if I do, let's hope nobody's life depends upon it next time."

His words were filled with such earnest simplicity that I felt a lump in my throat. I wanted to take him to a bar, order a couple of drinks and talk through the night over them, discussing all kinds of stuff. But somehow I sensed that would never happen.

"Pompous douchebag," Traug said, disrupting my reverie.

"What makes you say that?"

"*Stupid enough to push that table over*, he said! It wasn't my fault you started waving your hands in front of me! You blinded me, that's all. Never mind. He paid well for that little gaffe."

I tensed up. "What do you mean?"

"Here. That's what was on that table," he showed me the item he'd just pilfered.

It looked like a regular whistle, slightly bigger than the plastic ones used by PE teachers. This one was made of wood — wenge, to be precise, — veined with black. Somehow I didn't think it was meant to order clumsy students around the school gym.

"Give it to me," I said.

“Oh no,” Traug put the whistle away. “I’ll give it to you when we’re back in Sorrow. Otherwise you’ll go straight back and return it, I know you. You’re too chivalrous for a Seeker. It’s not a trait a real Player should exercise.”

“Traug!”

“I’ll give it to you back in Sorrow,” he repeated, darting off toward the Gatehouse.

What would you do with him? I had no other choice but to follow. As I ran, I checked my level-up message:

Available points: 3

Strength: 26 (x)

Intellect: 18 (x)

Fortitude: 22 (x4)

Agility: 24 (x2)

Stamina: 21 (x)

Rhetoric: 18 (x3)

Speed: 16

That made sense. The Destruction alone had brought me nine skills. Plus Resistance, courtesy of Jumping Jack’s little obstacle course. I’d have loved to invest some in Intellect, but the bonuses to Stamina, Agility and Rhetoric spoke in their own favor.

Congratulations! You have reached the first bonus sublevel of Stamina! Sublevels available: 4

Your resistance to all toxins and pestilence spread by cursed creatures has improved!

Congratulations! You have reached the first bonus sublevel of Agility! Sublevels available: 4

Your learning rate of acquiring the skills of small firearms and throwing weapons has improved!

You can now improve any Agility-related skill.

Small firearms, of all things! And improved toxin resistance! It wasn't as if I had a Catherine of Medici lurking around me. But as for improving any skill… they must have mentioned it for a reason.

Your current level of Lability allows you to select one permanent improvement to your body.

Sprinter. Improves your speed for a short period of time

Weight Lifter. Allows you to carry heavier loads for a short period of time

Marathon Runner. Lowers your Vigor expenditure during strenuous physical activity for a short period of time.

Oh. Ever since I was little, I've adhered to two great pieces of wisdom. The first one is, if you wanna stay healthy, you should eat alone and in the dark. Joke. And the second one, the best way to win a fight is by avoiding it. As they say, a fist is no match for two swift feet. Legging it in time is quite a valorous thing to do. Not really heroic maybe, no. They don't make movies about such guys; they don't get decorated, but they're normally the ones who make it home alive. So I selected Sprinter.

I got so deep in thought that I nearly smashed my head on the wide open door. Traug was already waiting for me inside. I took one last look back, surprised at the Community's tranquil lifestyle. Everybody seemed to be going happily about their own business. The only things that reminded one of the city being attacked were the occasional sounds of battle filtering in from outside, as well as the anxiety of the guards and the presence of Commoner Purgs sitting around by the gates. Of course, you can't judge a world by just one town, just as you can't judge a nation by only one person, but Purgator only evoked negative associations within me. Had it not been the only junction between earth and everything else, I would have avoided it like the plague.

Never mind. Time to go home. I got my fare of 64 grams ready and stepped inside.

ONCE BACK ON EARTH, we left the building with our very different personal emotions. Traug reminded me of a rookie on leave back in his home town, discovering all those girls who've reached the age of consent. I might just be right: I had a funny feeling he might go on another bender. Just in order to de-stress, so to say.

As for me, despite all my fatigue and yet another sleepless night, I still managed to take stock of my financial situation. It didn't look rosy. At the moment, I had 476 grams left. It wasn't even enough to pay Litius back. Of course, we collectively still had the rachnaids' eggs, but first we needed to sell them.

But the moment we entered the Syndicate building, all my anxiety melted into the background. Litius very nearly swept me off my feet, trying to give us both a big hug, as if checking that we weren't an illusion. Arts stood behind him, nervously biting her lips as she tried to smile.

"Finally you're here," she said, throwing her sketchbook on the table. I gave a mental chuckle when I saw she'd been drawing another hand grenade. "I'm gonna get you something to drink."

“You can do that later without me,” I said. “I can hardly stand on my feet. Arts, will you please give me my stuff back, and I’ll be off. Traug’ll tell you all about it.”

“Not even one quick drink?” she asked, giving me my phone.

“Only aristocrats and degenerates drink first thing in the morning,” I joked as I glanced at the phone screen. Oh. It was only ten a.m. The day was just starting, which was a good thing. Because seeing as our team was finally back together, we needed to decide what to do with the eggs. Or rather, where to sell them.

“We could sell them through the normal channels, but to do that, we need to make a quick trip to Cyrillia,” Arts said pensively.

“To Moscow, you mean?”

“Yep. Some you can sell on the black market. But seeing as they’re not illegal, I doubt there’ll be any takers. Still, it’s worth trying. We have so many that if we try to sell them all in one place, we might bring the whole market down.”

Traug scratched the back of his head. “I have an uncle at the Nogglean court. I could discuss it with him, I suppose. It’s true we’re not that tight — but he might turn a blind eye to our disagreements if the price was right.”

“In the meantime, I could analyze the purchasing power of some of Earth’s other communities,” Litius offered.

“Excellent. You do that. Here, take the eggs.”

I started unloading our rachnaid loot directly onto the table. After a brief discussion, Arts began packing them all into her inventory. Traug already had plenty, so he too had to hand some over to her because she was the one responsible for most of the sales. Still, he didn’t do it straight away,

promising to hand them over to her in a less public place. Judging by the lewd glint in his eye, he must have meant his bachelor pad. Still, I had a funny feeling she would quash all his expectations — literally, if necessary, because this girl could handle herself.

"And here, look what I got from one of the Kabirids," I produced the spear. "I can't use it. We might try and sell it, as well."

"Oh," Arts said, scrutinizing it. "It's got a name on it: *Krune*. It's no good for anybody else but this particular family. Anyway, once I've got rid of the eggs, I'll try and sort this out. I might just look up one of them."

"Excellent. Okay, I'm off, then. Keep me posted. Litius knows how to find me."

"Wait a sec. Take this," Traug handed me the whistle he'd expropriated at Jumping Jack's new place.

The moment I touched the artifact, I sensed its inner power.

Glowing Whistle

Summons the fluorites who are closest by, rendering them unable to harm the summoner for the duration of 1 minute.

So that's what Jack must have meant when he'd said we'd had everything to successfully pass the test. Or something like that. What an interesting item. Although…

"Why didn't you give it to me back in Purgator?"

"Because you'd have gone straight back to that pompous alchemist and given it back to him. And now you'll have to make a special trip to do so."

He had a point. I wouldn’t part with another 64 grams just for the pleasure of returning the whistle. I might do so some other time if I ever got the chance.

After another round of goodbyes, I finally left the Syndicate and hurried away from the Community limits while peering at my phone screen. I nearly jumped for joy when I finally had a signal. I quickly typed a text to Julia:

What time can we meet up?

She replied straight away:

I’m only free after 4 p.m.

Cool. I’ll call you then.

All of a sudden, I felt much better. I even began whistling as I headed for the bus stop. I’d get back home now, have a quick wash and go straight to bed. All earthly problems could wait. And then I’d just keep a low profile and try to be happy if possible.

I was so lost in reverie I didn’t even hear the sound of a phone going off. No, wait — it was *my* phone. It was Mom. What could I have possibly forgotten now? It was an eerie feeling: I knew I had to do something but I couldn’t for the life of me remember what it was.

“Sergei!” she snapped like a regimental sergeant major. “Why can’t I ever get hold of you?”

“I was out of range.”

“You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

“Of course not,” I said, rummaging through my memory for what I was supposed to have remembered.

“Good. Just checking,” her voice softened. “Did you receive Darya’s message with the address?”

“Of course I did.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 7.

“Okay. Try not to be late for the wake. See you later.”

I very nearly screamed as I hung up. Of course! How could I have forgotten! I checked all the missed texts and immediately found the one from my sister. It had been sent yesterday, giving the time and the place: today at 4 p.m., about twenty or thirty minutes’ bus ride from my place. In theory, I could squeeze in a couple hours of sleep, but what would I look like then? They might decide to shove me in the coffin instead of that Granny… Granny… oh great, now I’d forgotten her name as well. I’d have to turn up early and ask Mom, so as not to look completely stupid. The entire Demidov clan would be there, so help me St. Januarius.

Chapter 12

OUR RELATIONSHIPS with our neighbors are a very special story. Whenever we move house, we tend to look at a variety of factors: the neighborhood, the floor, the proximity of shops and schools, but we sometimes seem to forget the most important thing. How many stories do you know when the so-called “sworn friends” next door made one’s life hell so much so that you’d have to move again? They’d slander you, calling you a “whore” or a “junkie”, ruining your reputation for good or some would go even further and smear your door handle in you-know-what.

Considering the fact that I hadn’t gotten to choose my current lodgings, overall I’d been lucky with my neighbors. The kind-hearted lush Professor and his long-suffering wife; Uncle Nick a.k.a. Hunter; and naturally, Lydia and her tribe. Plus a few nodding acquaintances with whom I’d exchange an occasional “Hello”.

Still, there was a fly in that particular ointment.

I didn’t know the woman’s name. She lived on the third floor below me. I wouldn’t say she was old — probably about forty, give or take five years. Such a drastic age effect was probably due to her constantly worn-out appearance, hunched back and never a trace of makeup. She gave me the impression that she used to live a normal active life but that at some point, she’d simply gotten tired of it and slowed down. It was perfectly fine with me: everyone has their own hang-ups. Still, she had one particular drawback. Or rather, four drawbacks, constantly meowing but never leaving her apartment. According to the Professor, the cats had been living with her for quite a while — and judging by the smell, she’d never refreshed the cat litter. Which was probably why everybody tried to hurry past the third floor as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, today of all days Lady Luck had turned her back on me, dropped her pants and even flashed her butt in my direction. Because the cat lady's door was wide open, releasing all sorts of effluvia. But that wasn't the worst of it. As soon as she saw me on the stairs, the woman hurried toward me.

"If you've taken a dog, you should be walking it regularly, you know."

"How do you do, Ma'am."

"I've had a week of suffering your nonsense. All that constant howling and scratching! My cats can hear everything. They climbed under the couch and didn't dare come out."

"Three days," I corrected her. "Three and a half, if you want to be precise."

"You're not listening, are you? If you continue to mistreat the poor animal, I'll set the police on you."

What was I supposed to say to that? *Sorry, it's just a house goblin grieving for me. Don't worry, I'll have a talk with him, he's a responsible individual and will never do such a thing again.* In that case, the police would be the least of my problems.

Then I noticed a scruffy skeletal cat looking fearfully from behind the door, sniffing at all the odors of the stairwell. And what if…

I didn't even raise my hand; I just focused on the moggy and tensed my fingers up a little.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 2.

"What is it your mistress hates the most?" I asked.

“Are you taking the piss?” the woman threw her hands in the air. “Stop that meowing, right now!”

“She hates it when I climb onto the kitchen table,” the cat replied in all honesty.

“Then would you please climb the table and drop something on the floor for good measure?”

“Stop clowning around!” the woman glared daggers at me. She was about to add something definitely threatening enough to confuse and terrify me when the sound of a breaking cup came from within the apartment.

Or could it have been a sugar bowl? No idea.

“Marquis!” the woman rushed back inside.

Unwilling to push my luck any further, I hurried upstairs, to check on the most disobedient dog in the world.

“Master!” Bumpkin greeted me, draping a tea towel over his furry shoulder. Judging by all the amazing smells, he’d been busy cooking.

“Who do you think?” I said, trying to contain my disappointment as I realized that I wouldn’t get the chance to sample his cuisine. How was I supposed to explain my lack of appetite later at the function? “Take this. Here’s the wallpaper, and here’s some glue, to replace what you’ve shredded.”

I’d bought them on my way home; now I reached into my inventory and handed both to the goblin. Great thing, this inventory. It permanently freed your hands up and took care of any heavy loads. The items’ actual weight had diminished so much that I hadn’t even noticed it. Now the prospects of grocery shopping had ceased to be quite so daunting.

“Hunter didn’t turn up?”

“He did,” he said it in such a soft voice with his eyes lowered that I knew straight away that he must have screwed up again.

“You’ll have to keep that guilty expression for a bit,” I said. “I’m gonna make a plaster cast of it and hang it on the wall. Because that’s how you look most of the time. Okay, I’m off to the shower. Don’t lose track of what we were talking about because we’ll come back to it.”

Only when standing under the streaming hot jets lathering myself down with some fruit-scented soap, did I realize how much I loved civilization. All boys seem to be dreaming of going back in time to the Middle Ages, to become heroes riding under the banner of Richard the Lionheart or battling Livonian invaders on the ice of Lake Peipus with Alexander of the Neva. One thing they don’t seem to realize is that they probably would be dead within the first couple of minutes of their arrival, slain by a much more fearsome enemy: the lack of hygiene.

I spruced myself up and even had a shave. When I then took a look in the mirror, I didn’t recognize the person looking back at me. Don’t get me wrong: I was already getting used to seeing myself as a Korl. But even he had begun to change. Since the day of my first introduction to my real self, my blond hair had grown and my face looked drawn (because the deliciousness of Bumpkin’s dinners was balanced out by the fact that they were few and far between). My eyes had acquired a severe glint I didn’t recognize. The Sergei of old had changed a lot — and not just externally, either.

I stopped indulging in a one-man narcissism competition, toweled myself dry and left the bathroom. To my dismay, my Purgator journeys had had a devastating effect on my already few socks and underpants. If it carried on like this, I’d be flashing my bare backside all over Cesspit.

I got dressed, brushed my hair and slumped onto the couch, trying to suppress the rumbling in my stomach. I was quite morally prepared to withstand any news Bumpkin might throw at me, be it a broken computer,

flooding out the downstairs neighbors or even launching a nuclear strike on a neighboring country (I wouldn't put it past him). At least the supporting walls of the apartment were still in one piece which I suppose was good news.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"They managed to figure me out, Master."

"Ah, so it was you who killed John F. Kennedy? I guessed that the Kremlin's furry paw might have been behind it."

"No, no, that's not what I mean," he said, oblivious to the joke. "The neighbor from upstairs popped by and saw me."

"You mean Hunter?"

"Yeah…"

"So what?"

"I shapeshifted into you and answered the door. And he says, *why, isn't your master back yet*?"

"You looked just like me but he knew it was you anyway? Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"You shouldn't have answered the door, then."

"I didn't. He started fiddling with the lock. He's probably a burglar, the bastard."

I glanced at my watch. Normally, at this time of day I was still training with Hunter. He might still be in. I put my shoes and trench coat

back on and trotted off to face the music, feeling like a student who rucks up to an exam completely unprepared. I hung around his front door for a while, not knowing how to strike up a conversation. Still, I couldn't think of anything appropriate so in the end I just rang the doorbell.

He didn't open up straight away. He gave me the once-over, stepped aside and nodded, inviting me in. I entered, curiously looking around his inner sanctum. I'd never been in his other apartment before. There was nothing special about it; it was no Aladdin's cave or whatever. Cheapish light-colored wallpaper, wooden plinths, a stained-dark wall unit in the lounge and a woolen rug on the floor.

Hunter took me to the kitchen which was admittedly a bit modest too. A relatively new but equally low-budget set of cabinets, a whistling kettle, a sugar bowl on the table and some artificial flowers in a vase sitting atop a lacy doily. The air smelled of some herbs which reminded me of my childhood in some kind of "back in the USSR" déjà vu.

"Tea?" Hunter asked.

I nodded. Although I didn't want either tea or coffee, I knew that a conversation always goes better over a hot drink.

My mentor lifted the kettle and pressed his hand to its bottom. After a few seconds, the water began to boil.

"Tell me," he said as he poured out the tea into royal-blue Soviet-era china cups inscribed in gold, *"1975: Thirty Years' Anniversary of Victory over Nazism"*.

I had to chronologically recount all the events since our last meeting. Hunter didn't interrupt me once while sipping his tea. Only when I'd finished did he pause and say,

"That's the end of your fun and games. You killed a god and took possession of his powerful Dark Avatar. Quite a few people will now want

to see if you can walk the walk. This blond guy won't be the first or the last."

"Any idea who he might be?"

"No," he said frankly. "Did you say that you passed each other while flying?"

"Yep."

"Then he must have seen something in you. Something which made him go back to Lutum. I wouldn't be surprised to see him turn up here soon."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Stop playing around and get on with the more serious side of training. Tomorrow at ten in the foundation pit. But we'll have to buy a Fog Scroll first so that commoners can't see what we're up to. All right, that's it. Get going. I have to be on my way too."

I went straight downstairs without calling in at home. The cat lady's padded door on the third floor didn't contain her angry voice informing me that Marquis *"had a cheek and if he didn't stop misbehaving, he wouldn't get any tasty wet food"*. How crazy was that? I was the one who could speak to cats but this woman was doing so without the need for any extravagant spells.

Outside, things were only getting weirder. To begin with, Lydia's husband Victor was standing by the front door calling his son's name. Which was normal for a mischievous kid who used every opportunity to slink off. With one difference: little Boris was sitting by the garages less than twenty paces from his father, exactly where Victor was looking.

"Hi," he said, shaking my hand.

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Boris, who do you think? Lydia told me to get myself down to his school to find out how he’s getting on. And it turns out he’s already been playing truant for two days in a row! I haven’t told her yet. When she finds out, she’s gonna kill him.”

He must have read something in my stare because he added, “Metaphorically, of course.”

“Okay. I’ve got fifteen minutes to spare. Let’s split up. You go to the shops and I’ll check out the road to the school. He must be hanging around here somewhere.”

“Okay,” he agreed with surprising ease.

We split up. I made a show of leaving, then returned straight to the garage. I walked over to Boris and crouched down next to him.

He looked both surprised and scared. “How did you… sort of.. see me, like?”

So it hadn’t been my imagination, then. “I’m an ESP specialist. You’d better tell me how you do it.”

“I don’t,” he said, hiding his hand behind his back.

I chuckled and held a hand out palm up. After a moment’s hesitation, the boy laid a shapeless rock in it. It looked like any other chunk of stone except it was veined with green.

Repelling Stone

No of Charges: 91/110

Range: 60 ft.

Duration of one charge: 1 hr.

Renders everyone within the item's range invisible to commoners

Note: when activated, the item creates an urge in all commoners not to approach within its range.

"Where did you get it from?"

"The guy that you beat up gave it to me. Back in the foundation pit. He must have put it in my pocket."

"What do you mean, 'must have'?"

"We just stood there talking. And when I got back home, I put my hand in the pocket and found it there. The stone, I mean. He was the only person who could have done it."

"So it was the Choru- er, I mean, that guy you were with? Do you know how to disable it?"

"You just move your hand above it."

I did. The green veins disappeared, turning the artifact back into an unsightly little rock.

"I'm afraid I'll have to take it from you," I said. "This isn't a kid's toy."

He visibly drooped but didn't protest.

"You'd better tell me why you started skipping school."

"Eh, it's nothing," he shrugged my question off, biting his lip.

“Come on, tell me. I’m not your mother. I’m not going to judge you.”

“We have this guy, Pavel Kabanov. We call him Boar because that’s exactly what he is. He’s the worst bully. He said some really nasty things to Marina, she’s a girl in our class. So I told him to piss off.”

“Very good. A very chivalrous thing to do.”

“Chivalrous my ass,” Boris sniffled. “He and his buddies waited for me outside and they beat the hell out of me. And again. He said he’d now be beating me up every day until I pay him five hundred rubles[2]. And I don’t have it. So I thought I’d skip school for a while.”

“Why didn’t you tell your parents?”

“I’m not a grass.”

“I see,” I said, wondering if Russians would ever grow out of their inbred prison-hierarchy mentality. “In any case, that’s pretty stupid. Never mind. Let’s do it this way. Today it’s already too late but tomorrow we’ll go to school together, you and I.”

“Are you gonna beat him up?” Boris asked, getting all excited.

“Yeah right. The only thing I haven’t yet done is beat up children before breakfast.”

“He’s not a child! He’s thirteen already!”

“Okay, it’s settled, anyway. Let’s go.”

We headed for the supermarket where we bumped right into his father. When Victor saw his son, he took in a big lungful of air, readying himself to give him a lesson in tough love. I had to interfere.

“Boris, here’s ten rubles. Go to the vending machine and buy yourself some gum. Victor, there’s something you need to know…”

I shared the intel with him — omitting the artifact bit, of course, because it was a different secret entirely. Honestly, I could hardly have imagined Victor’s reaction. I knew very well what Lydia would have done: she’d have rushed off straight to school to blame and accuse everyone involved, thus completely ruining her son’s reputation in everybody’s eyes.

But her husband, whom I’d always believed to be a complete doormat, suddenly showed an unheard-of zeal.

“I’ll go there now and sort them out myself.”

“Okay. And how do you see it? A grownup man punching the living lights out of a minor? I have a better idea. I can go there myself. I might pass for his big brother. Also, there’re some things than speak louder than punches.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Persuasion

Mastery level: 1

Now every time you speak to a commoner, you can use one argument that might convince them.

“Thanks, Sergei. But if you don’t mind me asking, why is it you’re constantly helping us?”

“Well, we’re not complete strangers, are we?”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 8.

In all honesty, I wouldn’t know how to answer this question. I did like Boris, and his father wasn’t a bad guy, either. Still, I admittedly surprised myself with this show of altruism. Could it have been the influence of the Light Karma which I apparently had to spare? Also, my new moniker as Avatar of Light might have had something to do with it too.

I returned home, grabbed my phone and called for a cab. I’d been planning to go to the function by bus, seeing as it wasn’t very far anyway, but what with Boris and all, I just didn’t have the time. Never mind. What’s two hundred rubles for a cab when I was looking at all that profit from the rachnaids’ eggs?

I purposefully sat directly behind the cabbie and quietly pulled the stone out of my pocket. It looked just like any other piece of rock. I ran my hand above it just like Boris told me. Aha! I could now see the green veins glowing in the dark!

Just as I was admiring them, the cab swerved to the right.

“Where d’you think you’re going, mister?” the cabbie shouted out the window. “Are you blind?”

My mouth went dry. This wasn’t the best place for these kinds of experiments, was it? I’d completely forgotten that we were now invisible to everyone. Repelled by the artifact’s effect, other drivers would have loved to get out of our way, but they just couldn’t get off the road, could they?

I hurried to disable the magic gizmo and gave a nonchalant look to a saucer-eyed driver of a Lexus to our right. To him, we must have just materialized out of thin air.

I still had those Divine Stones to sort out. Just not at the moment. God forbid that I burn or freeze someone to death. I should choose some nice secluded place in which to test the rocks which I’d apparently “already met”.

All right then, enough gaming stuff. Time to get back to reality. I spent the rest of my trip quietly exchanging texts with Julia like any other commoner without any superpowers. We actually made up our minds to go skating.

Despite all my efforts, I was late. Maybe no more than ten minutes — but judging by my mother's face, that was almost enough reason to start a nuclear war. She nodded commandingly at a free place at the table. That was her domain: even Dad, the most authoritarian person in our family, kept a low profile.

The café where the wake was held was rather average. Nothing to write home about. Its owners were clearly aiming at budget weddings and other functions like this one: old-fashioned burgundy tablecloths on tables set out to form a U, shabby chairs and slightly frayed lace curtains. The fact that there was sufficient daylight was already a plus.

I curiously studied my numerous relatives all of whom exhibited various degrees of their Korl roots. Some of them were remarkably burly, with regular features and thick hair — but they were mainly older people whose Korl blood hadn't been too diluted yet. The younger commoners among them only differed by their lighter skin tone and fairer hair, like you would imagine a Scandinavian surrounded by a bunch of Russians.

But that was nothing compared to an old Korl at the far end of the room. Now he really caught my interest.

"Why are you standing there like you've just seen a ghost?" Darya asked.

"I wish it were a ghost," I said without taking my eyes off the old Player.

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Chapter 13

SOME PEOPLE tend to despise poker, regarding it as just a stupid card game you play in company after a few drinks. But it's actually poker that teaches you to contain yourself so as not to betray your inner emotions. The word "poker face" says it all.

It was also something I could have used right now.

"You've always been a bit of a nutter," Darya said under her breath, "but now you're even frightening *me*."

"I was just thinking about something," I said, trying to tear my gaze away from the old boy who'd definitely noticed me.

"Had you been a computer, I would have given you away for spare parts. Even my laptop doesn't freeze like you do."

"Don't start niggling now," Mum hushed. "Sergei, why aren't you eating anything? Take some koliva and a pancake[3]."

I had to comply. I served myself a spoonful of the traditional funeral rice pudding, folded a pancake and dunked it in honey, then started stuffing my face to the strains of the local church choir.

The only difference between a peaceful agnostic and an aggressive atheist is that the former doesn't try to prove a point. It was much easier for me to go along with certain traditions rather than to explain why I had no interest in them. Certain rites are much easier to perform when you don't take them seriously. For my Mom, my turning up here was a really big deal. It put her mind at ease. Better this than stage sacrificial services to Cthulhu.

I didn’t even notice them serving up the soup. I ate it absent-mindedly, as well as the mash and meatballs that followed, washing it all down with an ungodly fruit squash. Some old ladies next to me were talking in soft voices, doing exactly what I had no desire or intention of doing — namely, remembering the departed.

“Poor Sveta. She didn’t quite make it to her eightieth.”

“What are you saying? She was seventy-six!”

“That’s exactly my point. She had only four years to go.”

“…that wasn’t the only thing. I did tell her that one should never bring a fir tree in from the forest to plant in one’s own garden. It was a bad sign. But she did plant a baby fir tree, anyway.”

“That’s right. She planted it right next to her house.”

“Not next to the strawberries?”

“Yes, right next to them. It was me who gave her the four strawberry plants in the first place. The earth is so good at her place. In my garden, all my strawberries are always droopy, but did you see hers? They come into season before everybody else’s.”

“That’s because she gave them plenty of food every year.”

“Yes, and protected them from the frost.”

I lent half an ear to all this claptrap — with my Mom a rather eager contributor — while casting occasional glances at the old Player. He’d shown no surprise or embarrassment at seeing me. He actually pretended that nothing had happened at all, and continued talking to an old boy next to him. What on earth could they be discussing? Was it strawberries, or raspberry bushes — or even interworld travel?

Having taken stock of the situation, I finally chose the right moment and left the table. Most of the guests were already finishing their meals; my father who'd been sitting next to Mom had already left on some business. Some of the men started beelining for the exit to get their dose of nicotine.

"I'm going out for a smoke," I told Mom.

"What did I tell you?" Darya said without looking up from her phone. "I said he wouldn't last a month. So you owe me five hundred rubles, Mom."

Mom blushed. "Darya!"

"Here," I pulled out a five-hundred note from my wallet. An argument was the last thing I needed now.

Darya shamelessly took the money and turned her attention back to her phone. I got up from the table with unexpected ease and headed for the door, casting several glances at the old Player in the process.

Bingo. Our eyes met. I might have stared him out, had I not reached the exit already. I slipped through the door wondering how I was going to kill time. But Lady Luck hadn't smiled on me this time, because the guys outside were indeed all smoking. And one of them even noticed me.

"Sergei! Come over here!"

By a sheer miracle, I somehow recognized the mustachioed half-Korl as my Uncle Misha, Dad's second cousin — or was it third cousin? It didn't matter. The problem was, he'd already noticed me so I couldn't very easily ignore him.

"Have you come for a smoke?" he asked, shaking my hand. All the others flashed good-natured smiles at me as they said hello.

“No, just for a breath of fresh air,” I said as I shook hands, trying to determine the depth of our family relationship with them — not from memory, mind you, but just by the way they looked.

“You’ve changed. You look sort of stronger. Are you still working at the same place?”

For the following five minutes, I was dangerously close to blowing my cover. Firstly, because until now, I still haven’t invented a convincing profession for myself. I had to ad lib, promoting myself to a regional fiber optics shipping agent (which was the first thing that had come to my head). I very nearly told them I was married, but then I realized that if ever it came back to my mother, she would kill me, so I immediately split up with my imaginary fiancée. I then carefully diverted the subject from myself to the state of the Russian highways, and then on to the upcoming elections — a subject which really struck a chord with all the men who got quite hot under the collar discussing the subject of apparent interest to everyone. During their preoccupation, I took the chance to make myself scarce, noticing that the object of my interest had also left the café.

He beckoned me with his finger and went round a corner of the building which faced a busy street teeming with commoners. For that reason, I didn’t have to be afraid of him dishing out any physical damage to me. Especially because my overdeveloped Intuition was screaming at me that the man in front of me was my direct relative.

‘Well, Sergei, let’s get acquainted,” he proffered his hand. “My parents used to call me Vladamere, even though the name has perished over the centuries.

I shook his hand while taking the opportunity to activate Insight.

Vladamere

Herbalist

???

???

???

“Why not?” I said. “I can see that you know my name already. I only know that you’re a herbalist and my great-great-grandfather.”

“Oh,” the old man was visibly surprised, “that’s already a lot. How did you know?”

“My Insight allows me to see your development branch. Or is it a characteristic? It’s neither here nor there.”

The old man suppressed a smile.

“The degree of our relationship is even easier,” I went on. “I have a 1/16 part of Korl blood in me. And you, judging by your appearance, are a 100% Korl. Therefore…”

He nodded. “You’re right. In that case, let me tell you a little bit about myself. I was born in Noggle in the province of Cohr, living a life of a regular peasant’s son in that dark and perennially cold country. Until one day I became a Player. I was on my way to fetch some firewood when suddenly everything changed. At first, I couldn’t understand it. I just couldn’t figure it out. I thought I was going crazy. My parents were of the same opinion, by the way. That lasted until another Player chanced upon our village. He told me everything. But hearing something from a stranger is one thing, and having the possibility to see a new world with you’re your own eyes is quite another.”

The old boy fell silent, thinking about what he’d just said, looking not at me but at some imaginary point in the distance, as if remembering some painful moments in his own past.

“I spent several years traveling throughout Noggle. I saw lots of things: injustice, betrayal, cold-blooded murders for ten measly grams of dust… The fact that I’m still alive is only due to large doses of luck and my natural cautiousness. And once I came back to my village…”

His eyes welled with tears. He cleared his throat a few times, rubbed his forehead and smiled the sad smile of a martyr. “When I came back, I realized there was nothing keeping me in my home world anymore. During my travels, I’d heard a lot about Cesspit where Players had laws and where they had Guards to keep the peace. Without further ado, that’s where I headed. I changed my name to Vladimir, met a nice girl and had children with her. When my time to leave them had come, I obeyed the law and disappeared. But I always kept an eye on my own family, each time in a new guise.”

“How do you do it?” I asked. I must have become a cold-hearted cynic because his last words aroused the most curiosity in me.

“I have this skill…. Wait, I’m gonna show you.”

He pulled a handful of dust out of thin air which immediately began to solidify in the palm of his hand. After only a few seconds, I was looking at a large purple crystal. Vladamere a. k. a. Vladimir turned his hand around. The item dropped to the tarmac and smashed to bits.

I don’t think so!

[∞]

“…wait, I’m gonna show you.”

I didn’t let my ancestor drop the crystal. I quickly held my hand out, catching it, then watched it disintegrate in my hands.

Camouflage (Rhetoric). Allows the Player to change their appearance in Commoners' eyes, as well the style, color and size of their clothing.

Now this opened up some truly boundless opportunities to me. All kinds of bad thoughts about bank robbing and the like flooded into my head, but I dismissed them. This wasn't our style. Especially because a Player could always find a way to earn a living.

"How interesting," the old man said. "What's this, some kind of bonus to reaction times? Or a heightened intuition, allowing you to foresee your opponent's actions?"

"Players don't talk about their specialties," I repeated the phrase I already knew by heart.

Vladimir smiled. "You're a quick learner. Which is a good thing. Even I, after all these years spent in Cesspit, don't have any friends here. Only business partners. I can see you can stand up for yourself, which is a good thing. But I'm gonna give you something else now."

He produced a bunch of spiky grass tied with a string and a shriveled brown root.

"This is nepenthe," he said, giving me the grass. "It's very rare in this part of the world, but I managed to grow some at my place. I brought it here to sell but kept a bunch for myself. It makes good Oblivion potion, just make sure you don't make it too strong. And this is a mandrake root. You use it raw: just cut off a tiny bit and smear the juice on the wound. It'll heal everything, even the wounds dealt by moon steel and aurichalcum."

"Thank you," I said, putting the gifts away. To be honest, I didn't yet know what possible use they might be to me — but as they say, you don't take a gift horse to the dentist.

“Just please don’t tell anyone about me. Nor that I gave you these things for free. You see, the Seekers have this idea that nothing should be gained without an effort. You see, everything in the Game is based on the principle of ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’. This is something you’d better get used to.”

Yeah right. I already had — when Arts had charged me an extra 5% without as much as batting an eyelid. And even when I’d saved her life later on, she hadn’t even thought of offering it back. Like, you can have your thank-you and I’ll keep my money.

“I come to town now and again even though I live out in the sticks. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to contact me. Here,” he offered me a business card. “The phone is quite often out of range so you’d better email me. I check my emails regularly.”

I took the card. *Vladimir Golunov, Farmer*. A cell number and an email address. I could just imagine what kind of crops this particular farmer — or should I say Herbalist? — grew on his land. God forbid that the drug squad chanced upon his harvest! Those guys might have a stroke: mandrake roots, patches of nepenthe and all sorts of funny things.

“And remember. You have the blood of a great people coursing your veins. Even if it is only a few drops.”

He shook my hand and unhurriedly headed for the parking lot. There, he let out a shrill whistle.

I very nearly screamed as the outlines of a large animal materialized out of thin air. It looked a lot like a horse with an incredibly powerful back and neck. Its legs, however, were distinctly feline — not the dainty legs of a cheetah but massive and muscle-bound, like the rest of its body.

The creature turned its flattened muzzle to Vladimir and licked his neck. The fact that the distance between the two was at least three feet was of no consequence to anybody but me.

Snapdrake

Invisibility

???

Aha, so that's what you look like, my friend.

My ancestor climbed the beast's back, waved his goodbye to me and took off, joining the traffic on the street. I whipped out the True Mirror to check out his vehicle. Hah! In commoners' eyes, this was a brand-new Volkswagen coupe driven by a youthfully groomed old man. Once again I thought that the world would never be the same to me.

I returned to the café. The guests were already leaving one by one, complimenting Mom on her great organization. I wasn't at all surprised. She always wanted to surpass herself. I awaited my turn, listened to her brief lecture on the dangers of smoking and bade my goodbyes to the rest of the family. Darya managed to tear herself away from her cell screen and made a face at me (like, *"you're the lucky one and I'm still stuck here forever"*), then went straight back to her social media. And me, I escaped outside.

I breathed free and easy in the wintry air. Finally, the season was upon us. You could still make out the withered flowers in the city's flowerbeds dusted with the little snow that had fallen, but the frost was just starting to bite. I wasn't cold, of course; I didn't even wear my gloves, just raised the collar of my trench coat. Still, I had a funny feeling we were going to regret our skating date. It hadn't been my idea, anyway.

I arrived a good quarter of an hour before our appointment. The skating rink was almost empty: a few schoolkids, a couple of aspiring speed skaters, and a father and son with hockey sticks unenthusiastically throwing a puck to each other.

I rented a pair of skates and put them on just to get the chance to stand up on them. The last time I'd skated was at least four or five years ago, or maybe even more.

I laced them up tightly, got to my feet, took a few tentative wobbly steps and took off. Not took off, really: I skated slowly with my legs wide apart. Either the ice was uneven or the skates had been poorly sharpened — or maybe the skater just wasn't good enough — but I had to really struggle just to keep my balance. I circled slowly and even accelerated a couple of times, gradually gaining confidence. Compared to the schoolkids, my skill level was minus zero. It was already good that I hadn't yet fallen.

After a couple more circles, I had one desire left: just to sit down somewhere and kick off the wretched skates. My ankles ached with every movement; the backs of my thighs were throbbing as if I'd been doing situps with a barbell. Th only thing that still kept me on my feet was a new system message:

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 7.

"Hi," I heard behind my back.

My heart skipped a beat as I turned to see Julia skating toward me. My date looked like a million dollars. Her cheeks were pink with the frost; her eyes seemed large as if widened in surprise; the expression on her face kind of mischievous. I felt a bit lost. All the lies I'd prepared felt so naïve that I blushed. All I could manage was a pathetic "Hi."

"So what have you been up to?"

"Just taking care of some business," I said, unwilling to raise the subject of 'fiber optics salesmanship'. "I could only just catch a signal where I was."

"Your job seems kind of strange."

“You could say that. But it’s a case of just growing into it. And it’s not really a job even but rather a vocation.”

“Wow,” she smiled. She took me by the hand and we slowly did another lap.

Gradually, our conversation stopped being quite so jerky and smoothed out. Unhurriedly we continued to lap the place, talking about all sorts, like the latest bestselling sci fi novels and the failed attempts to bring them to the silver screen; a popular new phone app, and the best river beaches in our city. I noticed once again that being next to her made me feel completely at ease. I seemed to be forgetting all the anxieties, the scheming and intrigues as if I were a regular human being again and not a Korl Player.

Talking about which: it had taken me a while to have noticed my date turn into an Ice Queen. Her face had turned white; her teeth had begun to chatter. I hurried to take urgent first-aid measures directed at bringing her back to a normal human condition. We skated back to the rental office where I bought her some hot tea and started rubbing her hands. The tips of my own ears as well as my cheeks were tingling which meant it must have been quite frosty outside.

I returned the skates and went back to her. “How about going over to my place?

My words sounded unexpected even coming from me. I’d blurted them out without even considering their potential suggestiveness.

“No, no, no, I didn’t mean that,” I hurried to add. “We could have a cup of tea with raspberry jam[4]. God forbid that you should catch a cold.”

Actually, I did have a pot of raspberry jam sitting in my fridge. My Mom had made it and given it to me and I hadn’t touched it yet. Still, her answer came as a complete surprise.

“Tea with jam sounds good. Especially raspberry.”

The ordering of a cab followed by a brief trip in its warmth seemed to have lasted but a brief moment. Thanks to the weather, there was nobody sitting on the benches by the front door. My hands shaking, I unlocked the shabby front door and let Julia in, blushing for the miserable state of its exterior. Luckily, she hadn’t even had the chance to notice it. I dropped the key twice in trying to open my apartment door.

The goblin’s shadow flashed across the hallway. Julia let out a soft shriek. “Have you got a cat?”

“Sure. But you won’t see much of him, I’m afraid. He’s very timid.”

I helped her remove her winter coat, took her to the lounge and hurried to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I found the jam, dug up the pretty crystal bowl from my late Granny’s arsenal, then discovered some cookies which Bumpkin had very conveniently baked. He was nowhere to be seen. He must have holed up in some corner, poor bastard.

Ten minutes later, I returned to the lounge carrying a small tray. My freshly-brewed tea was not a patch on Bumpkin’s divine drink. Talking about whom…

My dear goblin had no intention of hiding. He lay belly up on the couch while Julia scratched him behind the ears. Judging by the happy expression on his face, he clearly enjoyed it. On seeing me, he jumped up and shot back into the kitchen with the speed of a small rocket.

“What a nice fluffy cat! Have you had him long?”

“No, only a few weeks. I took him in from the street. Let’s go drink some tea and dunk some cookies!”

Julia took a sip and set her mug aside. “How about we watch a movie?”

“Sure. What would you prefer? A comedy, an action movie, a thriller?”

“Whatever,” she got herself more comfortable on the couch and tucked her legs up under her.

“Whatever,” I nodded, booting up my laptop.

I might be a bit slow on the draw, but certain hints I pick up first time round. Which was why I promptly chose Stephen Fry’s *Twelfth Night*. An admittedly funny film, scintillating even. But it also had another very important property. It lasted for hours.

Chapter 14

THE PROBLEM WITH a man's word of honor is that he has to keep it. You can't just mention that you're gonna do something only to retract it later saying that you meant something else. Which is why there is a time to cast stones, and a time to gather them. And my time arrived the next morning.

Actually, yesterday had ended in the very best of ways. Our watching the film gradually transpired into a much more pleasurable activity. After a few hours, Stephen Fry had gotten tired of playing to an empty theater and called it a day.

By the time I took Julia home, it was already rather late. Ignoring her reassurances that she would be perfectly fine on the bus, I called a cab for her, managing to convince her that it was for my own peace of mind. I paid in advance and after a quarter of an hour received a text saying,

I've arrived.

The rest of the evening I'd spent in a state of blissful fatigue. I'd zapped through the TV channels for a while, texted to and fro with Julia, played some StarCraft and then gone to bed.

Which was why I just couldn't work out now why my morning was so busy. Some bastard kept hassling me with the doorbell, ringing and then going away only to return later and trying again. Judging by the time, it couldn't have been Hunter: I still had a couple of hours until my practice. Who could it have been, then?"

"It's the boy," Bumpkin said, materializing next to me. In all this time, he hadn't even mentioned last night's visitor as if nothing had happened. "The one who lives next door."

Oh Jesus. I'd promised Boris to sort out that school bully, hadn't I? My big mouth was my biggest enemy. I hurried to pull up my pants and don my sweater.

"Bumpkin, get me some socks, please," I said quietly.

The goblin disappeared and returned almost instantly with a heap of underwear.

"Bumpkin, I mean some *clean* socks."

Once again he disappeared and returned after a few seconds. This time his load was considerably smaller: five mismatched socks in various shades of black. I chose two that looked more or less similar, put them on and hurried to answer the door.

It was indeed Boris, cap in hand, his jacket lopsided, his eyes tearful. He must have thought that Uncle Sergei had let him down.

"Come on in," I said. "Give me two minutes and we'll be off."

I popped into the kitchen, grabbed a sandwich, demolished it with the speed of a combine harvester in August, splashed some water on my face and picked up an old pack of gum that must have been lying around a kitchen for at least a couple of months, by way of brushing my teeth. "Let's go!"

"Try to be quiet," little Boris warned me. "My mom might hear us."

I grinned. "And what can she do, give us a good hiding?"

Still, we did as he pleaded, sneaking like two field mice past the front door of Lydia the Great and Terrible. Once outside, we said hello to Professor freezing alone on his bench waiting for his "symposium" buddies and headed past the apartment block next door toward the school building.

“Come on, Boris, tell me all about my adversary. Everything you know about him.”

“There’s nothing to tell. He’s a total douche.”

When I heard his brief story, I tended to agree with him. This Pavel Kabanov, or Boar as they called him, was a real piece of work. He’d ganged up with a few similar slimebags to terrorize younger and weaker kids. His pickings were suitably miserable — a hundred rubles here, a hundred-fifty there — but it was still enough for a beer and a pack of cigarettes.

“Shame classes have already started,” I said as we turned off the sidewalk toward the school gate. “Now we’ll have to wait till the recession.”

As we approached, flocks of pigeons — of which there were plenty here due to the local babushkas’ generous hearts — took to the sky like vultures. One of them hit me on the head with a wing. Cheeky bastards!

“No, we won’t,” Boris said. “He never comes in time for the first class, anyway. None of his gang do, they either sleep in or they’re just late. He’s probably behind the school fence by the two garages now, smoking and waiting for the others to arrive.”

“Excellent. Where’s that?”

“Over there,” Boris pointed. “Behind the school.”

“And this Boar, what’s he like?”

“He’s short, fat and scruffy like a rabid dog.”

“You can’t call people that. He’s not a rabid dog.”

“No, he’s not. He’s much worse.”

“Where’re you gonna be? At school?”

“Nah. I’ve got Russian literature. I’d better wait here.”

“When I was your age, I could get a good whack across the ear with a copy of *War and Peace* from our literature teacher for saying something like that,” I grumbled, addressing no one in particular, as I headed for the garages.

It wasn’t just “two garages” — it was in fact a shanty town of illegal lock-ups scattered without any system around the waste lot behind the school fence. One day they’d all be torn down, of course, as the city’s gentrifying project was slowly but surely approaching our neighborhood. They’d clear away the old garages, tarmac the whole lot and turn it into a proper parking space. Then the old owners would come back, cement in two lengths of pipe and stretch a cable between them to make sure no newcomer could use it.

But that wasn’t gonna happen for quite a while yet. In the meantime, I had to tend to matters more mundane than improving the concept of public awareness. I squeezed through a gap in the fence and headed for the two garages that indeed stood apart from all the others.

Boris had been right. Four teenagers were taking cover behind them, smoking on the sly. Yours truly was in luck: the one standing with his back to me was indeed short and stocky with a disheveled mop of blond hair.

“Boar,” I said.

The teenagers hid their cigarettes — one even discarded his, dropping it to the ground — and froze in an uneasy silence.

Boar looked over his shoulder. His scared gaze took me in; he turned around to face me. Had he been alone, he might have legged it, but he couldn’t lose face in front of his minions.

“Whaja want?”

“Can we step aside? Need to have a word.”

“Who the hell are you, mister? I don’t know you.”

“Well, I know you. That’s why we need to talk. Why, you chickenshit?”

This was clearly a blow below the belt. The beauty of these prehistoric street laws is that they work both ways.

“I’m no chickenshit,” Boar said. Faking defiance, he turned to his buddies, “I won’t be long.”

We walked a short distance away toward the other garages. All things considered, Boar had no reason to be afraid of me. As commoners go, we were more or less the same weight, the only difference being, no matter how youthful I looked, he could still see I was much older than him.

“So?” he asked grimly.

“You know Boris Eliseev? The guy from-” I paused, cursing myself for not asking Boris which grade he was in, “from your school.”

He flashed me a cheeky smile. “First time I hear about him.”

He obviously knew what I was driving at but he’d chosen to play stupid. Very well. I’d anticipated this turn of events. If he denied everything, I might have to play my trump card straight out. Provided there were no Guards lurking around, of course.

“Well, then you have nothing to worry about, do you? He’s a cousin of mine. So he asked me to cast a curse on anyone who harassed him.”

Boar jeered. “Oh, sure.”

“I’ll be keeping an eye on the school for the next hour or so. If you want to talk, I’ll be there. After that, I won’t be able to help you anymore. The curse will come into effect.”

“Yep,” he nodded. “Is that all? I’ll be off, then.”

“Be my guest.”

I had no reason to linger, either, so I went back to Boris. Judging by the fact that my Lying skill hadn’t improved — and also by the guffawing behind the garages — Boar hadn’t believed me. Even my Persuasion bonus in speaking to commoners hadn’t helped me much.

Very well. We’d have to revert to deterrence methods.

I nodded to an anxious Boris. “Everything’s settled.”

I walked past him toward the school gates where the flock of pigeons was still busy scavenging. I chose the fattest one, stretched out my hand toward it and activated Talking With Lower Animals.

Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 3.

“Come here.”

The bird obediently flitted over and alighted onto my hand.

“Behind this building, there’re two big boxes made of corrugated iron. Next to them is a group of boys making smoke. Little people, you understand?”

“People, people, people,” the pigeon cooed.

“One of them has a head of unkempt hair. He’s the smallest in the group.”

“Smallest, smallest, smallest.”

“Just imagine he’s a monument in a square, a statue or something. I’d like you to give him a full load. And if possible, also scratch him a little, but not much. Got it?”

“Got it, got it, got it.”

“Off you go, then.”

The pigeon shot off my hand like a hunting falcon. I watched him fly, then leaned leisurely against the school fence.

“How did you do it?” Boris’ gaze drilled a hole in me. “What language did you speak? What did you say?”

“Nothing special. I’m a wizard, after all. Didn’t you know?” Smiling, I pulled out my phone, counting down a minute. Disheveled schoolkids sleepwalked past me — apparently those whose classes started later. Or maybe they just couldn’t have made it out of bed in time.

After about fifteen seconds, I heard a heart-rending scream. Instead of dying away after a while, it began to approach but didn’t quite reach us, stopping halfway to the school building once the spell had expired and the pigeon had taken off on some business of his own.

Poor bird. He might need the services of an avian therapist after all the things I’d made him do. But not now anyway, because I could already hear the cute baby chatter of rough adolescent voices coming from behind the school.

“Boar, you’d better clean yourself up, man.”

“Yeah, you should. That pigeon might be rabid or something.”

“You stupid or something? Birds don’t have rabies.”

“Maybe not. But how about bird flu?”

Judging by the sound of their voices, they were already quite close. Time to start Act 2. I walked over to the pigeons nibbling at some breadcrumbs and activated the spell again, selecting two of them this time.

“Come to me.”

The birds obediently perched on my hands. I walked back to Boris.

“Don’t be afraid. Then everything will be fine. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I set the two birds onto his shoulders. It didn’t look as impressive as I’d expected it to (he was a far cry from the image of a bloodthirsty pirate with a parrot on his shoulder) but it did the trick.

“Stay there,” I told the birds, then turned back to Boris. “Let’s get closer to the gates.”

We got there just in time, just as the four truants presided over by Boar had appeared from around the corner. Boar looked really pissed while his minions appeared extremely restless. Just think what havoc a single pigeon can do when caught by a makeshift garage.

Noticing Boris, Boar slowed down. His group did the same. The area in front of the school front door was dead silent.

Just then my vision sort of shifted, showing me the scene in a new light. Th bullies simply didn’t know how to react to the obviously nutty duo: a schoolkid with birds on his shoulders and a skinny grownup guy hovering behind his back. Especially when the latter began to tweet something as if conspiring with the pigeons.

Who seemed to have obeyed him. The two birds took to the wing with the precision of the Russian female synchronized swimming team and started circling Boar as if escorting him without exhibiting any apparent threat.

It looked admittedly scary, like a scene from a Hitchcock movie. Even a grownup might have panicked, let alone an emotional teenager.

“Okay, okay! I won’t touch him again! Get them away from me!”

I told the pigeons to leave him alone. They perched on the fence nearby without taking their watchful stares off him, looking more like guard dogs than proverbial doves of peace.

I beckoned Boar with a crooked finger. He approached.

“You’ll never touch Boris again,” I said. “Same goes for his classmates. Is that clear?”

“Yeah…”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 11.

Now I believed him. He meant it. I let him go and turned back to Boris.

“Now you. Don’t even try to pick on him. Don’t show off in front of your classmates. You two should just ignore each other. That’s the best strategy. Got it?”

He nodded.

A new message appeared before me:

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Diplomacy ability.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +1940. You gravitate to the Light Side.

"Uncle Sergei, why didn't you tell him not to touch anyone at all?"

"Because you can't tell a vulture to become a rabbit. Don't ask for the impossible. Don't worry, sooner or later his karma will catch up with him. It always does. But that's not our problem. Anything else?"

"Yes…" Boris faltered. There was a feverish glow to his eyes. His cheeks turned red. He paused, then finally managed, looking aside, "Thanks… thanks a lot."

"We're neighbors, aren't we? High five," I slapped his tiny mitt. "I'll be off, then. And Boris, please. Whatever else you do, don't skip literature."

With a Latino swagger in my step I headed back home. I could smell something mind-boggling already downstairs by the front door, and I wasn't mistaken: Bumpkin, this sadistic cook, was again concocting something mouth-watering. The worst thing was, I couldn't even taste it. My practice was less than an hour away, and Hunter had promised to show me something truly incredible. According to him, I was finally out of the playpen. So it wasn't a healthy idea to stuff my face right before training.

As the appointed hour approached, I had a quick warmup and hurried outside. It was much warmer today — a fact which was offset by the fierce wind. I wrapped my trench coat tighter around myself and set off across the empty yard. No, the fact that I was secretly clutching the Repelling Stone in my pocket had nothing to do with it: it wasn't even activated. The reason why the yard was deserted was the late morning — or early afternoon, whatever you prefer. Everybody was either at work or at

school, and as for the older folk and our front-door bench illuminati, the foul weather must have kept them inside.

The foundation pit wasn't too crowded, either. The only living being that was present — a stray dog, a cross between a sheep dog and a mongrel — darted off the moment he saw me. I climbed down the pit and, for want of a better thing to do, activated the Repelling Stone and laid it down on the ground by my feet. Now even if a commoner somehow wandered in here, he'd never notice me.

The only thing that was starting to worry me was, where the hell was Hunter?

I looked at my cell screen: my mentor was already two minutes late. This was so not like him. Could something have happened to him while I was waiting for him here like an idiot?

Just as I put the cell away, I glimpsed a shadow that rose behind me, followed by an almighty whack. I collapsed, my face slamming hard on the ground. My Health bar quivered and began to shrink — not much, but it shrank nevertheless.

I wholeheartedly disagreed with such a fight opening.

[∞]

I barely had enough time to recoil, so that the blow glanced off my shoulder. At least It didn't knock me off my feet. I felt the knife in my right hand — I had no idea when I'd whipped it out — while my left hand was readied to cast Electric Arc.

"Without your branch skill, you're an easy target," Hunter said.

"Says the Player who used his own branch skill to sneak up on me," I grumbled.

Hunter pointed at the artifact by my feet. “Where did you get the stone?”

“The Chorul’s gift. Not to me, though.”

Hunter shook his head. “I shouldn’t have bought the Fog Scroll, then, but it’s probably better this way. As you can well imagine, I’m about to take your training to a whole new level. And to boost your motivation, here’s a new rule I introduce: every time you defeat me, you’ll get either a new skill or a new spell of my choice.”

“Love it. What can I use against you?”

“Anything you want. Including your time games, if you think they might help you. Come over here and give me your hand.”

I obeyed. Several lines of text scrolled before my eyes:

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood. In case your life is threatened, your vital energy will be restored from the Seeker’s own stocks.

“Ready?” Hunter flashed me a smile that promised nothing good. It was as if something dangerous and predatory had just awoken in him which had been dormant for a long time and had now finally emerged from its slumber.

Hunter took several steps back, increasing the distance between us, and produced something that looked like a cat o’ nine tails. I imagined its heavy leather ends wrap around my leg and shuddered.

“Full contact,” Hunter warned. “Get your weapon out.”

I drew my Katzbalger and brandished it a few times, warming up my wrist, then began to circle my mentor. The only magic spells I had were

Electric Arc and Freeze. Somehow I doubted that I'd be able to overcome him with a basic Destruction spell. But then again, why not?

I thrust my hand out and cast Electric Arc. My homegrown lightning hit a translucent yellow protective sphere that had formed around him and expired. This little was perfectly clear: he must have activated some kind of power shield.

Let's see if the school of Modification might work. I cast Freeze. Strangely enough, it seemed to have worked, covering his silhouette with a faint layer of frost. Which meant I had five seconds, effective from now.

I lunged forward without taking my eyes off him. I was pretty sure he still had a few trump cards up his sleeve.

Oh God was I right. The spell didn't seem to have slowed up his movements. Hunter stuck his right hand out, sending me flying. I heard the crunch of my own vertebrae as I landed, followed by a brief message:

End of combat

I don't think so!

[∞]

An instant before he cast the spell, I'd somersaulted forward. It wasn't my best effort: the frozen ground at the bottom of the foundation pit was a far cry from the soft training mats in my mentor's apartment. Not very pleasant, I tell you.

I clambered to my feet almost within touching distance from him. If before I'd only wanted to tag him, now I really wanted to give him a good thrashing.

Still, the cat o’ nine tails was quicker off the mark. Its leather thongs wrapped around my legs, throwing me off balance.

[∞]

I lifted my leg, escaping the whip. Hunter now was in a disadvantaged position as he leaned forward with his arm outstretched. My previous fall (even though it admittedly hadn’t happened in this particular time stream) had resulted in a powerful adrenaline rush which seethed in my blood and coursed through my head, washing away every ounce of mercy within me.

I brought down my sword, aiming at his shoulder, but it just bounced off as if hitting an invisible barrier. Another sphere lit up around him, only this time it was light-blue.

It was followed by the worst hook I’d ever had in my life.

“YOU OKAY?” a voice said.

“No. I feel like meat that’s been tenderized but not yet grilled.”

End of combat

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 4.

As if I didn’t understand! My split eyebrow was proof enough. My right eye had swollen so much I could hardly see out of it.

“Don’t move,” Hunter said, casting a spell.

Judging by the fact that the pain eased up almost immediately, it must have been some sort of Restoration spell. The bleeding had stopped, too.

“What the hell was that?”

“That, my friend, was a high-level fistfight.”

“No. I mean your protection.”

“I see. That’s called Mantle. A one-off spell absorbing any non-magic damage. Like a gunshot or a stabbing.”

“I want it too.”

“If you whop me, I’ll give it to you.”

I nodded and got to my feet. Finally there was some meaning to all this ass-kicking.

Chapter 15

YOU SHOULDN'T BELIEVE those who tell you that the key to achieving your goals is to turn up in the right place at the right time. Even if you have a God-given talent in an area that seems to come easy to you, achieving true mastery takes a lot of hard work. Until then, you're only a rough diamond in the making.

I'd always been a stubborn ass who'd never learned from his mistakes. Which must have been why I'd decided I could win Mantle during my first sparring practice. As a result, I'd nearly lost a couple of teeth (which were now pretty loose) and earned more than my share of bumps and bruises.

Predictably, I hadn't won. To add to this, my body wasn't up to all this quite yet, voicing its protest through giving me sharp pains in the most unexpected places with every step I took. I barely made it home.

Bumpkin immediately began fussing around, then ran off to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I wanted to tell him that this wasn't the right moment for a hot drink but I just didn't have the energy to speak. I flopped down onto the couch and started scrolling through the last system messages.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 9.

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 9.

Your Acrobatics skill has increased to level 6

Your Blocking skill has increased to level 4.

Your Resistance skill has increased to level 3.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 6.

Your Mid-Range Armor skill has increased to level 2.

Your Illusions skill has increased to level 9.

Four more skills, and I'd make it to the next level. Only I didn't want to embark on any rushed leveling ever again. Not only did I look like a raw steak, I really felt like one as well. Even though the combat system had duly fed me Hunter's HP, and despite the heals I'd received from him after every bout, every time I'd had to get up and start all over again.

I grunted, turning over onto my sore side, and saw Bumpkin standing before me. Or rather, I smelled him first — a most obnoxious stench coming from a mug he had in his hands which reeked like an industrial-size garbage dump. Like a master perfume maker, he'd managed to gather every kind of effluvium in one fell swoop. A true maestro!

But is was his unusual insistence that surprised me the most. He stuck the mug in my face and said with a voice of a nurse tending a terminal patient,

"Drink this."

"No way! Do you want to get rid of your old master and find yourself a new one?"

"Drink it! It'll make you better."

"I prefer less drastic ways of body cleansing."

"Just drink it!"

Trying not to breathe, I gingerly accepted the mug and took a quick swig. It tasted bitter and nauseating, like freshly drawn milk from a cow

which had gorged itself on sagebrush. I wanted to give the brew back to him but he forced me to finish it. Only then did he retrieve the mug.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I didn't feel special. At least I hadn't thrown up, but now I couldn't keep my eyes open. As I drifted off, I heard Bumpkin's voice:

"I made it with whatever I could lay my hands on. What a shame there's no deuceweed around! Then it would have worked straight away…"

I'd no idea how long I'd been out cold. I woke up instantly, as if emerging from under water. I sat up and looked around, unable to comprehend where I was exactly.

Only then did I realize that all my horrible aches and pains were now gone. I still felt as though I'd had a good thrashing but it now seemed as if it had happened several days ago.

I pulled out my cell and swiped away all the missed calls notifications. I'd only been asleep for a couple of hours.

"Bumpkin," I called as I got up rubbing my joints.

He materialized straight away. "You've come round, Master!"

"What the hell did you give me?"

"Just a drop of herbal tea. It's a family recipe. My Gran taught me how to make it. Didn't it help you at all?"

"It did. It's just that… Do you think you could make up another batch? Ten times as much," I asked as the outlines of a cunning get-rich-quick scheme began to form in my head.

"If you need it, why not? Same way as I did it today."

“Think you could make some extra?”

“Are you trying to land me in the shit? I can’t. If the Guards find out, there’ll be hell to pay. They’ll accuse me of all sorts. Only Seekers are allowed to practice alchemy, herbalism and commerce. But not house goblins. No way.”

“What a bummer!” I didn’t even try to conceal my disappointment. “It’s like laying your hands on a nuclear weapon and not being able to use it.”

“Who says you can’t use it? If you buy me all the herbs for the potion, I’ll always make you some when you need it. Wait, I’ll make up a list.

He disappeared and came back almost immediately, handing me a piece of paper covered in scribblings. I turned it around. Trust Bumpkin to have used the back side of the gas bill.

I ran my eyes over his old-fashioned, childish writing. *Four-leaf baneberry, dog’s wort or alternatively some precocious blossom, datura, deuceweed, ground clematis, acrid cottonweed and a dash of hemlock.*

“Excuse me, Bumpkin, but what if I can’t find any acrid cottonweed? Would the normal kind do?”

“Absolutely not. It won’t be the same effect.”

“And one more question. When did you learn to read and write?”

“My parents made me learn letters when they followed their masters to the city. Their masters were merchants, you see, so once the city founded its own fair, they moved here permanently. We used to live by the St. Makarius monastery then. Those were the days!”

His face fell. Now he looked sad and dispirited. He didn't even dematerialize but trudged back into the kitchen. I must have touched a nerve he was unwilling to discuss with anyone but those closest to him. I needed to think of something to cheer him up.

But first I turned back to the gadget which had become the essence of a modern person's life: the cell phone. I had a missed call and several texts from Julia, plus a couple from my Mom and a missed call from someone not on my contacts list. So I decided to do what children do: eat the soup first, and then the ice-cream. Meaning, I'd call Julia last, so that nothing else would distract me. Let's start with the least important.

"Hi, Sergei, put this number on your list," I recognized Arts' voice. "It's mine. Well, at least one of them. We're waiting for you in the Syndicate. I just popped out to give you a call. That numbnuts has sold all the eggs he had."

"Which numbnuts?"

"Your compatriot."

"Traug?"

"Exactly. So you'd better make it quick before he's completely sozzled."

"Got it," I hung up.

Talk about the "least important"! Now I'd have to hurry over to the Community. I struggled into my trench coat, pulled on a new pair of socks, put some shoes on and shouted to Bumpkin that I'd only be a minute and would be back with all the herbs he needed — and maybe a little something to boot.

As I walked down the stairs, I called Mom. Luckily, the reason she'd called wasn't me but my big sister. Apparently, Lily had just been

offered a good job in a company abroad (which must have involved our Dad pulling a few strings, of course).

"…and she's just said she wasn't going because she was in love, of all things!" Mom raved. "You'd better speak with her because your Dad is absolutely furious. This isn't very wise of her, after all."

That's when I exploded. I just needed to get it off my chest. I told her everything I thought about my parents' talent of meddling in their children's affairs. About my Dad's remarkable ability to help when nobody asked for his assistance. About my sister being an independent and grown-up person. And that even if her decision proved to be a mistake, at least it'd be *her* mistake. Not anybody else's. Because at the end of the day, that was exactly what adult life was about.

I could hear that Mom was a bit embarrassed. She mumbled a quick "Talk to you later" and hung up, leaving me standing in the middle of the yard, phone in hand, grinning like an idiot. Sometimes it can be great to get things off your chest.

"Hey man, d'you live around here?"

A burly young skinhead stood before me. I'd seen this kind of cagey stare lots of times before. His skimpy biker's jacket hung open, revealing a loose black T-shirt inscribed with the words *"Proud to be Russian"*. Four other young guys stood in front of him, two of which were almost as big as Traug.

I turned to stone as I instantly recognized both the hooligans' leader and his sidekicks.

"Are you deaf or something? D'you live over there?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

You can be the greatest Player in the world, see off a shedload of rachnaids, defeat a God and rescue a friend right from under the noses of Kabirids — but a regular street hood popping up in front of you can make you quake in your boots. That's more or less what happens when a martial arts expert comes across a junkie completely off his head — he simply doesn't get the chance to focus and get his act together. I needed to concentrate.

"There's a young guy living near you. Skinny, medium height, black hair. About twenty years old. We're looking for him. He's an ex-classmate. We're friends."

One of the "friends" started guffawing but quickly got a dig in the ribs from one of the others.

"A young guy?" I said. "Nobody like that here."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"In that case, d'you know an old boy? A bit of a drinker."

I very nearly asked them whether he was also one of their ex-classmates. By now, my fear had gradually subsided, replaced by a slight irritation with them for having brought out the worst in me.

"He lives here," I said. "On the top floor. Sorry, guys, I'm already late."

I squeezed past them and walked the length of the yard. The hoods were busy talking among themselves as apparently, the answers I'd given hadn't provided them with the information they needed. I turned a corner and took out the True Mirror.

God bless Camouflage! I was looking at a well-worn workman of about forty years of age, dressed accordingly in a pair of faded blue jeans, a filthy winter jacket and a fur hat pushed to the back of my head. Then the reflection rippled, changing to the way I used to look when I was still a commoner.

I had to get the hell out of here. I also had to decide what to do with these lowlifes. Although they wouldn't be able to recognize me with Camouflage on, the very fact that they were hanging around my house wasn't good news. Also, what was I supposed to do if they actually did find my apartment? I absolutely had to do something about them.

I called Julia and talked with her for a while, swearing on my life that we'd meet up in the evening. The girl replied shyly that she had some family staying so she couldn't come out for long. I knew what she meant. It didn't take a rocket scientist. Even though my hormones were playing havoc with me, a normal red-blooded male, I still had to comport myself like a gentleman. Or at least try to.

I spent my bus ride to the Community deep in heavy thought. The game kept throwing up new surprises at me, not letting up for one moment. On the other hand, development is all about setting new tasks and completing them. It's like this in everything you do. You can spend your whole life in your tiny comfort zone, but you won't get anywhere. In the end, you might realize that you can't live like that any longer, but then it's too late to change anything. So you need to constantly expand your own comfort zone. Not try to escape it as some idiot life coaches suggest, but *expan*d it, so that an action which used to instill fear or discomfort in you only a year ago, now becomes easy and trivial.

The thing was, I did understand all this — the problem was putting it all into practice. I started by getting off the bus at a totally different stop. Ever since I'd discovered the second exit from the Community, I'd kept thinking about it — both as an escape route as well as a potentially interesting place. And I wasn't mistaken.

A tiny old lady was sitting by the entrance to a courtyard selling second-hand junk which was laid out on a makeshift table set on a stool. According to my calculations, that was exactly where the second exit should be. It would have been perfectly fine — but this old dear who looked as if she'd stepped straight out of a Soviet-era postcard was actually a Player. The name tag hovering above her head proudly stated,

Weaver

"Is there something you like, son?"

I stared at the heap of junk that most people would have discarded without a second thought. How could one possibly find anything useful between two old electric irons, a few dog-eared murder mysteries of questionable quality, an array of gas wrenches and other such garbage? I suppose you could, considering this was a Player who sported such a curious specialization.

"You don't have any underwear, by any chance? Like socks, underpants, that sort of thing. Not normal, I mean, but something suitable for one of us."

She nodded. "I have just the thing."

She produced said objects straight out of thin air. Some light-colored socks you might wear on honeymoon and an ugly pair of baggy floral-patterned boxers that might have been all the rage in her home village when she'd been younger. "They're high-quality cotton. I made them myself. And these are linen."

I felt them. "No stats?"

"I don't subscribe to all that nonsense. Underpants should be underpants. No point stuffing them with all those stats and things."

"You've got a point there. How much?"

“The socks are six grams a pair, the underpants nine.”

“So!” I whistled my surprise, remembering the derisory prices I’d paid for my second-hand gear.

“Yes, but all these undies are hand made! You won’t find this quality anywhere else!”

I had a funny feeling she was fleecing me shamelessly, but the problem of my underwear had to be resolved pronto. I had the money, anyway. And judging by what Arts had said, Traug had also sold his share of eggs.

“I’d like four pairs of each, please. But I’ll give you fifty for the whole lot.”

“What do you mean, fifty? Spare another couple for an old lady.”

“A couple, then,” I nodded, handing her fifty-two grams.

Your Bargaining skill has increased to level 4.

Somehow I didn’t think she was hard done by. I watched her packing my purchases into a plastic bag from one of the local supermarkets, thinking: there you were, living your whole life until retirement, entering God’s waiting room, as bureaucrats would put it. And one day, Bang! — you joined the Game, simply because someone had killed a Seeker nearby, thus forcing you to take his place.

And that was it. Life as you knew it was over. You had to learn and adapt. She might not have even been able to weave before becoming a Player.

“Are you all right, son? Just take it!”

I put the plastic bag into my inventory, thanked her and headed for the Syndicate. I came across a few Guards in their inevitable masks as well as a couple of Players. Rumis was busy smoking on the porch of his magic emporium. I nodded to him and he returned my greeting.

One of the Seekers was busy sweeping snow off the Syndicate building's steps. I decided to wait, which was why I heard Traug before I saw him.

"The next round's on me… hic! But none of that Ullum crap that you pour down your neck, Litius — no offence meant, hic! Hey, Bourtok! Bring us some of that Archaeth ale!"

Traug was standing in the middle of the room, waving his arms like a nutty orchestra conductor. Arts was trying in vain to calm him down while Litius was sitting at the table resting his hairy head on his hands, looking completely disengaged.

"What's all that noise about?" I said by way of greeting.

"You'll see in a moment," Arts said through clenched teeth. "If he doesn't calm down soon, he'll get a dose of my staff."

Traug stopped showing off and turned back to her. "I'd rather you gave me a taste of something sweeter than that."

A knee in the groin quickly put paid to his ardor.

I grinned. "Please sit down, gentlemen… and lady. Traug, stop your groaning. If it hurts so much, just jump on your heels, it's supposed to help. So — tell me."

"Bourtok! Another jug of ale!" Traug shouted as he landed on a chair next to me, still clutching his manhood. "Hi, Sergei. You can't imagine what I just pulled off, and she hasn't got a kind word to say to me."

“I would have, had you not started spouting off about it left, right and center. All you did was draw attention to us.”

That was true. There were currently about fifteen or sixteen players sitting there drinking, not counting the servers, and all eyes were upon us — some openly, others furtively.

Bourtok, the Purg bartender, set the jug down in front of us and gave Traug an ingratiating look. “Does it still stand, your offer of paying the next round?”

“It does. Traug of Keralon always keeps his word. Everybody knows that.”

“In that case, I’ll serve everyone.”

The bartender scurried off, finally leaving the four of us alone. Litius was still sitting there calmly, resting his head on his hands. Arts was glaring daggers while Traug looked at me with the sad eyes of a puppy. Just wait a second, man. First we’ll sort everything out and then you’ll get your drink.

“So, tell me all about it!”

“There’s nothing to tell. I sold almost all the eggs, and that’s it end of story.”

“Yeah right. God’s own salesman,” Arts said sarcastically.

“Could you expand on that?” I asked.

“I have an uncle back in Noggle,” Traug began. “To be honest, he’s quite an old fox. But he knows how to do business. Recently he received the title of baron and the post of majordomo. The previous majordomo had had to purvey some rachnaid eggs for a Royal feast. But he failed the task,

even though he'd already hired some mercenaries to help him. You know where he was going to procure them?

A lightbulb lit up in my head. "In Purgator."

"How do you know?" Traug asked in surprise.

"The murder of a Queen in Purgator does affect the distribution of royal court positions in Noggle," I repeated the words which had imprinted themselves on the back of my mind. "That's what the Chorul told me when I was about to die."

"You never told us," Arts interrupted.

I motioned her to stop. "Then it does make sense. The murder of a Queen in Purgator affects the distribution of royal court positions in Noggle. And the disappearance of a stone in Cesspit might change the direction of a trade route in Elysium. That's what he told me."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know yet. But seeing as the first part of his prediction came true, so should the second one. We only have to find out how."

Chapter 16

YOUNGER GENERATIONS are always impatient. We don't have the time to finish listening if we think we already know what the speaker is driving at. We don't recognize authority, believing ourselves to be much smarter. We often make mistakes on an emotional impulse which we later live to regret.

Why on earth hadn't I kept my mouth shut, listened and waited for the Chorul to finish? *The disappearance of a stone in Cesspit might change the direction of a trade route in Elysium. The murder of a Queen in Purgator does affect the distribution of royal court positions in Noggle. And something as petty as a mechanoid's rusty joint might-*

I'd never found out quite what "a mechanoid's rusty joint" might cause. Simply because I'd interrupted the Chorul.

All I can say in my defense is that at the time, I had other things to worry about than indulging in any Machiavellian intrigues. I had a sword sticking out of my guts, for crissakes, while hovering in some weird location between worlds, if you know what I mean.

Still, It didn't make me feel any better now. I was pacing the tiny room like a caged animal, thinking about this new riddle.

"Here," Litius appeared in the doorway with two more jugs of ale.

Traug hurried toward him. Arts was sitting on the bed with her nose in her sketchbook, casting disapproving glances at the two boozers. We'd prudently decided to stop tempting providence and moved our butts from the Syndicate to a more private location — but as it turned out, we hadn't bought enough alcohol to go. Which was why Litius had had to make a booze run: we just hadn't dared let Traug go out on his own.

“Sergei, will you *please* calm yourself and sit down?” Arts said. “We can’t think of anything right now, anyway.”

“There’s nothing to think of,” Litius interrupted her, watching greedily as Traug filled the dirty glasses. “First, we need to find out more about the trade routes from here for Elysium and see which ones have recently been rerouted. Then we need to find the Seeker who asked for the change of course. And finally, we need to find out more about your mysterious stone. Easy.”

Arts chuckled. “Well, do it then, if you think you’re so smart.”

“It’s only a question of time,” the beastman shrugged, “similar to growing a spell crystal or visiting the Oracle once you reach the age of maturity.”

“Talking about which,” I sat up, “I think I’m mature enough already. How about I make an appointment with this Oracle?”

Arts raised an eyebrow. “What, you haven’t done it yet?”

She wasn’t the only one acting surprised. Traug stopped pouring out the drinks and stared at me. Litius nervously twitched his ears.

“You really should,” Traug took a large swig of his drink. “He does help us Players. What a shame you can only ask him one question.”

“A lot of folk have noticed a dramatic improvement in their development after speaking with him,” Arts agreed.

“Okay, okay, don’t get so worked up!” I protested. “I know I should! I had lots of other things on my plate, in case you hadn’t noticed. Too busy getting you guys out of trouble.”

“Sergei’s right,” Litius took my side. “In any case, he needs to think of a question first before seeking advice from such a powerful Player.”

“Thank God for that! At least Litius understands me. Have *you* been to see the Oracle?”

“Yes, I have,” my feline friend replied calmly. “I saw him on my second day in Cesspit. He answered my question — but by doing so, he also replied to a gazillion others that I had. As I’ve just said, you need to think of the right question to ask him.”

“Very well,” I said. “If this is all we have left to discuss, let’s get back to the eggs.”

“About time,” Arts said, climbing back to her feet.

Traug walked over to the table next to a tiny window and swept its contents onto the floor. A large mass of dust materialized out of thin air and thumped to the tabletop. It looked rather like sand but finer and yellower — what they call dandelion color. It seemed to mesmerize all of us.

I greedily licked my lips, struggling to tear my gaze off its riches. “How much is there?”

“Eleven kilograms three hundred and forty grams,” Traug replied proudly, “or exactly twenty-five pounds. I had to knock the wholesale price down to thirty grams per egg. But it’s still not bad, is it?”

Arts punched him in the chest. “You idiot!”

Traug staggered, staring incomprehensively at her, then turned to me, seeking protection. “What’s wrong with her?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Arts snapped before I got the chance to reply. “You just don’t attract attention to yourself when you have this kind of money on you. And this idiot started ordering rounds! What a dipstick!”

“Hey, hey, guys,” I said. “You have to admit there’s nothing better than counting your chickens after they’re hatched. Or eggs, as the case may be. And seeing as our team has shrunk to four members — after Jan’s sad but inevitable departure — the loot is now divisible by four.”

“Plus my extra five percent,” Arts added.

I gave her a grim look. “How can I ever forget.”

Litius effortlessly divided the heap of dust into four uneven smaller bunches — uneven because my share was the smallest.

I swept 1,768K into my bag, leaving five hundred grams on the table. “Litius, this it what I owe you,” I said, nodding at it. “Thank you. And here’s another seventeen — it’s seventeen, isn’t it? — of Traug’s. Take it.”

Traug nodded, adding the measly pinch of dust to his share.

I looked at the two kilo-plus I now had in my bag and smiled. I’d never had this kind of money before in my life. The rest of the team didn’t look too unhappy, either.

“How many eggs do we have left?” I asked.

“Two hundred and three,” Arts replied, “but we should really hold on to them. Oh, and about that spear of yours. I contacted the guy’s family, they’d like to buy it off you. They’re coming to Cesspit to discuss it with you.”

“Excellent. What are you planning on doing now?”

“Get drunk,” Traug happily raised the jug and took a few gulps.

“And I’m gonna find out about any changes to Cesspit — Elysium trade routes,” Litius said seriously without taking his eyes off the other jug. “As soon as I hear something, I’ll let you know.”

Arts motioned me aside. “Can I have a word?”

We went out. The other two didn’t even notice, too busy drinking themselves into a stupor. Would Traug be able to pace himself or would he only stop once he’d boozed all his gains away?

“You’re obliged to go to the Oracle, now,” the girl said under her breath.

“I’m not obliged to do anything.”

“Cut it, will ya? You know very well what I mean. I have a very bad feeling about it. Something’s gonna happen. It feels like the lull before a storm.”

She did look anxious, for some reason, so I decided to humor her. “I know I should. As soon as I have some time...”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow what?”

“I’m going to Crete tomorrow. That’s where the Oracle lives. You can come with me, if you wish.”

“No, wait a second. I’m just not buying all this altruistic shit. Five minutes ago you demanded your five percent without even thinking who it was who’d rescued you from captivity. And now all of a sudden you’ve decided to chaperone me for free?”

“Firstly, I do owe you, I know. And secondly, I didn’t say I had no invested interest in it.”

“Will you please elaborate?”

“Do you remember that harpy mission issued by the Oracle? I need to complete it.”

“So you want me to believe that you’re quite prepared to travel all the way to Crete just to smoke a few harpies for a measly two hundred grams?”

Her face turned crimson. She scratched her burning cheeks and wiped the perspiration from her brow, apparently oblivious to the subzero temperature. “The mission is bullshit. No one wants it. What I need is the harpies’ claws. They’re quite valuable. Somebody hired me to get some for them.”

“Arts, lets be honest: what do you need so much money for? We’ve just earned 2K dust each — more, in your case. But first you have these fishy dealings with Pull and now...”

“You’re right,” she said. “I need dust. A whole lot of it. It’s not for me even but for...” she paused as if wondering if she should tell me the whole story but apparently reconsidered. “So basically, I just need money. That’s the extent of it. If it all pans out, I might tell you about it. But at the moment, I’m just offering you a hand. You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours. You help me with the harpies if needs be and I’ll take you to see the Oracle. Otherwise you might spend several days on the island looking for him.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“Please do. I need the answer before tonight.”

“Okay. Listen, if you need money... you think I could help?”

She gave me a sad look tinted with condescension. “You don’t have enough.”

Then she left.

I lingered for a while, not knowing what to do, then hurried away from Traug's hovel and the hoarse strains of his voice bellowing some lewd song or other. God forbid that one of them should stagger out and bump into me. I had no wish whatsoever to get into drinking with them. Especially because I already had plans for the evening.

Instead, I wandered off looking for a herbalist. Naturally, I already had one of my own — and a family member to boot. But I'd still not quite managed to work out where exactly I stood with this ancestor of mine. Also, he was here on business so he was unlikely to have brought all the trappings of his herbal collection with him. While the herbal ingredient shop was actually right there, two doors down from Rumis' Magic Emporium.

The shop owner was busy sweeping his own porch — not with the help of any magic as you'd think but with an actual broom. I'd already worked out that every shop owner was responsible for the area adjacent to his or her premises. Judging by the orderliness of the rest of the Community, they must have had someone looking after it too — either the Guards or some Players hired by the Sachem. Although I couldn't imagine how much you'd have to pay a Seeker for doing such a menial job.

"Hi. Are you the herbalist?"

The question begged no answer because I already knew it in advance from my Insight which gave me the guy's admittedly unusual specialization: *Naturalist*. All I had to do was put two and two together.

The short man wiped his bulbous purple nose, shoved a gnarly finger in his hairy ear, scratched it and nodded. "Are you buying or selling?"

"First I'm buying, and then we'll see."

He motioned to me to follow him. Before entering, he stomped the snow off his old felt boots and gave me a stern look, expecting me to do the

same. I obeyed, then entered.

I found myself in a kingdom of shadows. The thick curtains on his windows blanked out all light, so the room was dark even in daytime. My head span from the plethora of spicy odors. All of a sudden I felt terribly drowsy, so much so that I completely forgot what I'd come here for.

The shop owner came to my rescue. He drew the curtain aside on one of the windows and opened it a little. Then he walked over to me and reached over my head, removing a bunch of something that looked like purple garlic. He put it away and pointed to a wobbly stool. I had to sit down.

"So, dear sir, how do we call you?"

"Sergei."

"I'm Polycarp," he proffered his hand, as big and gnarly as those oaks in fantasy novels. "So what would you like to buy?"

"Well, I've got a list," I handed him Bumpkin's scrap of paper.

"Well, baneberry I have... And this too... Datura as well... But cottonweed, I'm not so sure. I need to check my stocks. I think I still have some. Wait here, I'll go and see."

The herbalist walked over to the far end of a dusty carpet and threw it aside, revealing a roughly forged square handle. He threw open the cellar hatch and with a grunt climbed down. He was only absent for a few minutes during which I must have dozed off at least a couple of dozen times. It was only the stool itself that prevented me from falling asleep, one of its legs being shorter than the others, so every time I dropped off, it began to wobble, bringing me back to reality.

Finally, Polycarp returned, clutching two dry twigs. "Here, I found some, but only enough for two elixirs. So I'll give you the rest of the herbs

in the same proportion. Unless you only want one."

"No, I'll take two," I said unhesitantly. "How much will that be?"

"Fourteen for the whole lot."

If I could whistle, I would have done so. Bumpkin's home cures cost a small fortune! On the other hand, it was entirely up to me. If I wanted to spend several days squirming in pain, so be it. But if I wanted to be as right as rain, I'd have to shell out. Especially because I now could afford it.

"Do you do discounts for regular customers?"

"For real regular ones, yes. But for you it's still fourteen grams."

"Not even a wholesale discount?"

He even stopped stuffing the herbs into a small bag. "You a wholesaler? That's not even funny."

"You're not an easy man to do business with, Mr. Polycarp."

"Had I been easy, I'd have gone bust years ago. So are you gonna take this or not?"

"Sure."

I parted with my fourteen grams and shoved the bag of herbs into my inventory.

"What did you say about having something to sell?" he asked. "Were you bullshitting me or do you have something worth my while?"

For a moment, I felt offended that this guy wasn't taking me seriously. I checked my stocks and chanced upon the nepenthe. According

to my great-granddaddy, it was an awful rare ingredient. Let's see if he was right.

I produced the herb and showed it to Polycarp.

He nodded. "Ah, nepenthe. Very special stuff. Not many people need that. Besides, unfortunately for you, there was another guy here earlier today who sold me three bunches of it already. And I don't need any more."

Aha, so Vladimir had been here before me. Which meant that it was also pointless offering him the mandrake root. I frowned. Apart from the stones, I didn't have anything else to show him — apart from the elixir I'd received from Jumping Jack. I needed it for myself, of course, but nothing prevented me from just showing it to the vendor. I might also find out how much it actually cost.

I gingerly took out the fat vial and showed it to Polycarp.

At first, the brightly-colored elixir failed to evoke any interest in the shopkeeper. He gave it a disinterested look — but only until I tilted the vial slightly to one side. The movement of the viscous liquid caused the shopkeeper's eyes to open wide in disbelief.

"Is this what I think it is?" he asked without taking his eyes off the vial.

"It is. The enchanting scent of the Elixir of Power," I unscrewed the lid ever so slightly so that he could sniff it.

"How much do you want for it?" his voice broke with excitement. He cleared his throat and added in a calmer voice, "Name your price."

"Any price I want? How about two kilos?"

"One and a half," Polycarp said.

Now it was my turn to be surprised. I'd had my suspicions that this orange shit wasn't cheap — but my idea of "not cheap" had come to a much more modest amount. Like, a couple of hundred grams, maybe three. And if he was willing to shell out as much as a kilo and a half right off the bat, it meant that I might be able to extract much more from him when the moment was right.

"I'll think about it," I said, putting the vial away. "At least this way you can see that now and again I have some interesting things."

"Can I take another peek?" he asked, almost shaking.

"Later. I need some time to find out what kind of guy you are. To tell you the truth, my first impression wasn't that favorable. You refused to give me a discount and you were quite rude to me."

"I didn't do it to spite you," he said, visibly embarrassed. "It's just because I have all sorts of time wasters here telling me all sorts of stories. It's not always easy to tell when a customer is serious. If I could somehow compensate you in any way..."

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 12.

"I'd like to make a gift to my house goblin. Could you recommend me something?"

"Of course. Take some chamba. Some even call it goblin weed. It is to house goblins like catnip is to cats. They absolutely love it. Only you know the rules, don't you? Goblins are forbidden from buying herbs or procuring them in any other way."

"How long has this rule been in force?"

"A good hundred and twenty Cesspit years."

"Okay, I'll take it. How much is it?"

“Just forget it! It costs nothing. Just take it as a sign of my good will. But please do come back whenever you have anything interesting or if you decide to sell your elixir. I might be able to go a little higher with my price.”

I shook his shovellike hand and assured him of my cooperation.

Outside, I looked at my watch. I still had some time, so I headed off to Rimus’. Firstly, I needed to finally procure the skills I hadn’t bought on my previous visit. And secondly, I’d made level 10 in Destruction which meant I must have had new spells available.

He was there, looking grim. Had it not been for all the filthy melted slush on his doorstep, I might have thought I was his only customer. Without further ado, I got straight down to business.

Rumis gave me an angry nod. He definitely was out of sorts. He walked over to the pulpit and took my hands in his, transporting us to...

No, it wasn’t the forest glade we’d been to before. This was some hi tech garbage dump teeming with cyborgs who ignored our presence entirely. Only now did I realize that Rumis conjured these visions up from out of my own subconscious. Last time it had been a poetic landscape; now it was some industrial zone in Detroit.

I didn’t even get the chance to ponder over it before a new system message flashed before my eyes at the speed of a corrupt civil servant trying to eat the evidence of a bribe while being arrested.

Map Making (Intellect). The ability to memorize the locations the Player has been to in order to preserve them in his or her mind in the shape of maps. For a certain fee, maps can be put onto pieces of parchment or transferred to Seekers.

Cost: 100 grams

Echolocation (Intellect) — the ability to detect and identify sounds at a large distance.

Cost: 500 grams

Dodge (Agility) — the ability to avoid critical hits dealt by stabbing, slashing and throwing weapons.

Cost: 800 grams

Capacity (Strength) = the ability to increase the weight you can carry.

Cost: 400 grams

Observation Skills — the ability to perceive information-rich details of an object or item.

Cost: 600 grams

Imitation (Intellect) — the ability to create accurate fakes or copies of items, including artifacts.

Cost: 1500 grams

Just when I'd thought that now I was rich and could finally live the life of Riley, someone had to come and piss on my parade. Apparently, as my spending power grew, so did the scope of offers available. I mean, a kilo and a half for the ability to forge artifacts? Nobody's arguing that it's a very profitable skill but still...

I forced myself to stop shivering and tried to think rationally. I had 2167 grams of filthy lucre on me. Which meant I could now buy all but two skills — but I shouldn't forget about spells which must have also gone up in price. This meant I had to limit myself to the bare necessities.

Bye, Imitation. Fifteen hundred grams was an atrocious price to pay for a skill. Bye, Capacity. One day when I was richer I might come back for you, but in the meantime I had Traug as a pack mule. Sorry, Echolocation. One day we might become friends but not today.

That left me with three skills: Map Making, Dodge, and Observation. The former was a no-brainer, for that price. My hand reached for Dodge and froze. At the moment, time rewinds were sufficient for all my needs, and besides, I could find better uses for eight hundred grams. But Observation, coupled with my Insight, could become a killer weapon.

I can’t say I parted with the seven hundred that easily, but at least I knew I’d done the right thing. The high-tech dump disappeared: we were back in the shop again. I hurried to study my acquisitions.

Map Making (Intellect). Allows you to select one of the ability’s three options:

- setting up a geolocation marker allowing you to find your bearings;

- the modeling of an object with the help of existing data;

- drawing maps on parchment

I unhesitantly chose the marker option, then rummaged through my interface, searching for my city’s interactive map, and admired the bright red marker waiting to be set up. Yes!

I zoomed out, taking in the unfolding panorama. That’s my house over there, and here’s my beer kiosk and the river where I used to swim every summer. How interesting. To my embarrassment, quite a lot of my home city was concealed by the “mist of war”. Never mind.

I zoomed out further. A thin line of railway tracks connected my city to Moscow. Paris and London were barely perceptible dots in the background. The air routes to Turkey and the Crimea were wider and more distinct: that's where my parents used to take me for summer vacations. That was the extent of it. The rest of the world was submerged in darkness.

So many places I was yet to see! But not now, unfortunately. I went back to my home city, found my house and pointed the marker at it.

Immediately I sensed a fresh breeze touch my face. It was quite tangible — I could see its almost imperceptible currents that headed for Rumis' front door.

Oh wow. Did that mean that I had my very own GPS navigator? Admittedly, it could only work in an area I'd already been to, but even that was nothing to sniff at.

Feeling encouraged, I closed the marker and searched for my second skill.

Observation Skills (Intellect). Your current Intellect level allows you to select one of the following skill applications:

- *to living beings*

- *to natural objects*

- *to manmade items*

I shrugged and ticked *"to living beings"*. Nothing seemed to have changed. I peered at Rumis, just in case, but he was still his old Purgatorian self. So how was it supposed to work, then?

"Quit staring," Rumis said. "You taking the spells or what? Or are you gonna upgrade those you already have?"

“I need to think about it. Probably a bit of both.”

“Come along, then,” he hobbled toward the second floor.

I froze, lightning-struck. *Hobbled*. I’d never noticed the way he walked before. You couldn’t say he was limping, no: he seemed to walk with a stiff mechanical gait typical of people with bad joints.

“Rumis, you *are* from Purg, aren’t you?”

He turned back to me, the cunning squint in his eye telling me I’d guessed right. “Why?”

“You haven’t been modified or anything?”

“I knew you’d notice it. I was actually of two minds whether to sell Observation to you. I’m a Purg, yes, but not quite.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“There’s nothing to tell, is there?” he shrugged and pulled down his pants. I opened my mouth to protest but the words got stuck in my mouth. His backside was a metal installation bristling with lots of little pegs and cogwheels.

“I made myself some pretty nasty enemies over there so I had to flee. I hoped to get to one of the central worlds but I never made it. They caught up with me in Mechilos and all but killed me. The local mechanics put me together again. Officially I’m a Purg but I’m registered as a mechanoid shop keeper. One of those things. Come on now. I don’t have all day to shoot the breeze.”

He hurried up the stairs while I stood there watching him, trying to take in this latest development. Just think of all the things I could do with this new skill of mine!

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Chapter 17

WE ALWAYS SEEM TO treat our new acquisitions with a special deference. The arrival of a new vacuum cleaner makes us vacuum everything in sight, including window sills and pictures on the walls. We meticulously clean the white sidewalls of our new designer sneakers every evening. Now imagine what you feel when you get the ability to see all kinds of little peculiarities in people (and other living beings).

Which was why, as I climbed the stairs to the second floor of Rumis' shop, I lingered by the filthy little window studying the street below. Take the Guard, for instance, swaggering along the pavement outside. Nothing out of ordinary: the same black mask, the flowing robes, the haughty attitude. The only difference being, he was playing with a tiny little flame as he walked, flicking it between the fingers of his right hand like a little magnetic ball. An absent-minded, mechanical action, like hammering your fingers on the table or tapping your foot while listening to your favorite song. But that was enough for me to conclude that I was looking at a mage specializing in Fire spells.

Or take the Archalus following him. He was virtually indistinguishable from his brethren: light-footed gait, beautiful wings. But his face was sallow and bloated, his nose veined with a purple spidery net of burst blood vessels. The guy was a boozer. How curious.

"Human, do you mind? My patience isn't infinite!" Rumis' voice was filled with indignation.

I pulled myself away from the window and hurried to the cyborg who was already waiting for me behind his pulpit. It looked even more battered now, the rear of it actually half-charred.

“Are you modifying the existing spells or buying new ones?” Rumis asked without further ado.

“New ones first, please,” I said, offering my hands to him.

The next moment, I gasped. I was standing at the very edge of a precipitous cliff. An ocean raged below, whipping up a foam as white as cream. Sea birds darted overhead, screaming in hysterical fear. A storm cloud was approaching a tiny island ahead. Judging by the view, the cyborg shop keeper seemed to be in a truly foul mood. I’d better buy what I could while I still could and make myself scarce.

Fiery Flash. Deals 60 pt. of one-time damage, ignoring your opponent’s physical armor. Cost of use: 70 pt. mana. Cost of learning the spell: 120 grams

Ice Flourish. Creates an ice blade which deals 50 pt. of one-time slashing damage plus another 5 pt. damage for 6 consecutive seconds. Cost of use: 80 pt. mana. Cost of learning the spell: 150 grams.

Electric Field. Creates a special form of matter over an area of 30 sq. feet. Every opponent within this area receives 10 pt. damage per second.

Bonus: for the duration of the spell, all your opponents’ movements will be slowed down.

Cost of use: 100 pt. mana. Duration: 12 sec. Cost of learning the spell: 500 grams.

Rot. Deals 8 pt. damage per second. Cost of use: 80 pt. mana. Duration: 20 sec. Cost of learning the spell: 300 grams.

Well then, my friend, did you actually think you were rich? Time to tone down your delusions of grandeur and get back to reality. Considering the rate at which prices had soared, I could only imagine what awaited me here in the future. No, theoretically I could still take it all even if it left me

broke. Even though these days, I already felt piss poor even sitting on a couple of hundred grams of dust. But I still had to have some kind of safety cushion. So I had to limit myself to a maximum of two spells.

No sooner said than done. I added both Ice Flourish and Electric Field to my arsenal. When we went back downstairs, the shop owner handed me two crystals.

“Do I get two hits at it?” I asked him, taking aim once I’d absorbed the spells.

He nodded. “Sure.”

Very well. I selected a standing target and wafted my hand in a very smooth and composed manner as if I’d been casting Ice Flourish my whole life: first, raising my open hand palm up, then making a clenched fist as if closing it around the hilt of a sword, then bringing it sharply down.

The target spewed blue light. I heard a loud crackling noise. The smell of ozone — or whatever — filled the air. The painted roundel of the target started steaming ever so lightly, the target itself sliced in two, held together only by a thin sliver of wood.

How cool was that? Now let’s see what Electric Field can do.

I stepped to one side and started to make circular movements with my arms, all the while experiencing some kind of discomfort inside. I was doing everything right and still something felt wrong. I thrust my hands forward but nothing happened. Instead, a blue bar appeared at eye level, flashing. I’d completely forgotten that I was very low on mana.

“Sorry Rumis, I seem to have a bit of an oops moment. I’ll have to wait up a little before checking this spell out.”

“All you so-called wizards!” Rumis grinned. “Half of you seem to have the same problem. You buy a spell and you don’t even have enough

mana to cast it.”

He laid his hands on my shoulders. It felt like I’d had a double hit of Red Bull. Then I sensed a jolt as if electrocuted, which made me all jittery. It took me some time to notice that my mana bar had filled up.

“Now you can cast it.”

I nodded and repeated my earlier maneuver. My right hand traced a circle in the air, following the left one; then they cupped together as if touching a ball, palms up, fingers close together. And hey presto!

It looked like a Tesla coil, but without the transformer. In place of electromagnetic waves, it produced electric charges. Every now and again, a tiny bolt of lightning sparked inside, striking the target which promptly fell apart after about four seconds.

“Great,” I gasped.

‘Yeah,” Rumis agreed, casting a remorseful eye at the splintered wood. “So are you going to modify your existing spells?”

“Yes, please,” I offered him my hands.

This time we traveled somewhere empty and completely dark. Never mind. Better that way. At least there were no distractions.

Modifications available: Electric Arc

Parameters after modification : 70 pt. one-time damage. Cost of use: 80 pt. mana. Cost of modification: 100 grams.

To be honest, Rumis held no surprises for me with this one. It was almost identical to Fiery Flash with a marginally better damage — but which in turn required a larger expenditure of mana. On the other hand,

keeping the old version was a bit of an embarrassment because it only dealt 40 pt. damage. I had to have it.

“You aren’t going to test it, are you?” Rumis asked. “Same crap, different bag. And slightly bigger damage.”

To tell you the truth, I had indeed wanted to test it — but the cyborg’s words took the wind out of my sails. I bade my goodbye and hurried to leave the shop. I curiously studied all the passersby, noting all the little differences, and even hung around the square for that purpose for a while. Finally, I snapped out of my reverie, looked at my phone screen and hurried to exchange dust for rubles. Fifty grams brought me almost 45,000 rubles[5]: today’s course cheered me up no end as I rushed toward the Community gates.

From there, I called a cab — which showed up almost instantly — and slumped onto the back seat, checking out the driver just in case. His blood-shot eyes and two-days stubble were clear indications that the guy was constantly deprived of sleep. I reached for the seat belt and fastened it just in case. Better safe than sorry.

I texted Julia saying I was on my way but she didn’t reply. I fumbled with the phone for a while, then slipped it back in my pocket. It was high time I organized my interface.

The actual interface looked like a canvas bag with tabs. I clicked on Weapons and saw my Katzbalger and the moon-steel knife. The latter I’d absent-mindedly shoved into my inventory every time I’d used it instead of putting it back in its arm sheath... wait a sec! Why did I only have one?

I clearly remembered having two of them: one that Hunter had given me and the other which Pull had dropped when he’d died. Where was it now, then? Had someone walked off with it?

I started switching tabs. Everything else was in place, though. The dust, the stones, the elixir, the herbs and the roots that my ancestor had

given me. My head swam with confusion. It didn’t make sense.

Trying to get rid of the surreal feeling, I started going through the stones. The one I’d expropriated from Boris was different from the rest, both in size and pattern. But Arthall and Karthall looked like they were two parts of the same thing. Although different in shape, they were both smooth as if polished. The cold indifference of Arthall was balanced by the unbridled heat of Karthall. Nevertheless, they gave me the impression they were a part of something much bigger.

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Intuition ability.

I closed my hands around both stones and took them out. As I fumbled with them, I brought them closer together — and my heart began to pound because several things happened at once. Firstly, the cab’s engine had died, and judging by the driver’s exquisite array of four-letter words, it wasn’t going to spring back to life any time soon. Secondly, the stones were drawn to each other like two powerful magnets. And thirdly, I’d been blinded by a flash of light — and possibly I wasn’t alone.

I didn’t hang around long enough to finish watching this show. I shoved the stones back into my inventory and froze in my seat, looking like a schoolboy who’d just busted a window. Against the cabbie’s will, we were grinding to a halt. All his cussing could be summed up with the phrase *“I rue the day when I took the steering wheel of this wretched vacuum cleaner!”*[6] Not that it helped him in any shape or form.

“What’s up?” I asked in my best innocent voice.

“Search me,” the driver replied gloomily as he tried to start up the car again. Nothing happened. “This isn’t a car, it’s a real bitch,” he added, near to tears.

“Meaning?”

“Do you see the words *Check Engine* flashing? That’s the end of your trip, I’m afraid. The starter turns but the damned thing won’t kick in. It might be dead or I might need to replace the engine control unit. Give me a hand to push it to the curb, will ya?”

I got out and placed my hands on the dirty trunk. The driver climbed out too and, holding the steering wheel with one hand and the door with the other, set his weight against the bodywork.

I don’t know whether the old me would have managed something like this. But as it turned out, pushing a couple of tons of scrap metal on wheels wasn’t a problem for a Korl like me.

You’ve helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +1960. You gravitate to the Light Side.

“Thanks, bud. Looks like I’m stuck here for a while. You’ll have to take another cab. What a bummer! I paid out my last money for insurance only yesterday!”

“Listen, take this,” I said, offering him two bills of five thousand rubles each[7].

“What the hell for?” the cabbie asked, surprised.

“For nothing, really. Just take it. Because I’ve got it and you need it. It’s not my last money. Take it.”

“Are you serious?” he asked, incredulous. “Come on, quit screwing with me.”

“I’m not,” I forced the money into his hand. “Have a nice day! I hope you get back alright.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +1980. You gravitate to the Light Side.

I didn't hang around listening to his words of gratitude. Frankly, I didn't deserve them. It was my fault that the car of this hard-working man had broken down. Or rather, it was the stones' fault. Which, as I'd just found out, gave some interesting effects when brought closer together.

"Thanks again!"

I was so deep in thought I didn't immediately realize who was shouting. I turned, waved to the cabbie and continued on my way. I sleepwalked to the bus stop and caught the next bus.

First it was the dagger that had disappeared on me, and then the stones started behaving weirdly. I felt like a little boy who was carrying a portable nuclear power plant on his back without even knowing. Lots of questions, but not a single reasonable answer. Having said that... I knew one particular Seeker who seemed to know everything about this world. What if Arts had been right and it was time I spoke to him?

Besieged by these oppressive thoughts, I finally reached the stop I needed. After another ten minutes of following well-trodden tracks through the 'hood, I finally arrived at the building I was looking for. I'd called Julia on the way, so she was already waiting for me by the front door.

"Let's get out of here and have a talk somewhere else. My whole family is hanging out the window trying to catch a glimpse of my new boyfriend."

"I feel sorry for them. If I turn sideways, they won't see anybody, anyway."

She smiled. “Get away with you! I’ll be so happy to take a break from them.”

She kept on talking about having too many aunties twice removed who all bred like rabbits and descended upon you uninvited expecting it to be a pleasant surprise, which it wasn’t at all. I kept on listening to her and even smiled in all the right places, but my mind was elsewhere.

“Sergei, what is it? Are you fed with all my yapping?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You seem to be withdrawn, sort of. You don’t even look at me.”

“I’m not fed up with you at all,” I said, kissing her. “In fact, I’m very observant. For example...”

I looked her over from top to toe, praying for my new skill to work. And indeed I found something — not exactly what I’d hoped for, but still.

“You like knitting.”

“Yes,” she said, surprised. “How do you know that?”

“The skin on your index finger is slightly rougher than all the others, and you have a tiny little callous on the tip of it. Of course that could mean lots of things. You could be a bookkeeper for the mafia working from dusk to dawn counting their spoils. But knitting, to me, sounds far more likely.”

I was on a roll. I had no idea where I’d dreamt all these things up. Why knitting? Why the index finger? I might have seen something like that on TV or heard my mom talking to her friends about it. Who knows?

She smiled. “Elementary, my dear Watson. I do indulge in a bit of knitting. Very therapeutic. You didn’t answer my question. Are you all right?”

“Just some problems at work.”

“You mean they want to fire you?”

I chuckled. “I’d hate that to happen. Hopefully, everything will blow over. Just a temporary hiccup.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow. My parents want to go to the country to look up some relatives. And as we’re such a close-knit family, I can’t wriggle out of it.”

“For how long?”

“I hope it’ll only be for the day. The internet is a joke over there, so I’ll only be able to text you.”

“Mother Russia is a huge country but not all of it is covered by Wi-Fi,” I said. Everything seemed to gel so conveniently. Could it be a sign from above?

Half an hour later, I’d already taken her back home and was standing on the corner by my own house. Admittedly, I was a bit anxious. I really wasn’t looking forward to meeting that bunch of hoods again. You couldn’t really call it fear — especially not now that my arsenal had been upgraded. If anything, there was a higher likelihood that I’d end up killing one of them. But would I actually be able to?

An interesting question indeed. In the cases of both Jan and Pull, I hadn’t noticed any particular pangs of conscience. I’d been put in certain conditions, and I’d acted within them. Also, there was another important thing: up until now, I’d regarded the killing of a player as something that wasn’t actually real. One moment, the person was alive and then they just vanished into thin air as if they’d never even lived. But this... there’d be actual dead bodies. As in, *dead* dead. Lifeless pieces of flesh. Police

investigations. And all that that entailed. That's provided the Guards didn't get to me first.

Then it dawned on me. I wasn't actually afraid of the moral repercussions. What scared me was the inevitability of punishment. Had someone pitted me one on one against the hoods' leader and said, "Only one of you will come out of this alive," then I wouldn't have batted an eyelid.

How strange. Since when had I become so cynical and cruel? Was my soul really as Light as the game seemed to believe?

All this philosophizing turned out to be for nothing because the courtyard and the lobby were both empty. I unlocked the door of my apartment which smelled of freshly-made borsch. The table was already laid with rye bread, cream and a few cloves of garlic next to a clean soup bowl. My goblin was waiting for me.

"Bumpkin!"

"Would you like some dinner, master?" my self-appointed majordomo greeted me from the kitchen.

"With pleasure. But first, come in here, please."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, materializing right in front of me.

"Here, take this," I handed him the freebie herb I'd scrounged from the shopkeeper.

His eyes grew to the size of saucers. I mean, literally. "It can't be," he beamed. "I haven't held that stuff in my hands for at least fifty years! I've even forgotten how it tastes! I'm gonna make a nice brew straight away! Well, Master, thanks a bunch. You've made my day."

"Just forget it. What's a bunch of twigs between friends? Or rather, between Players?"

I barely had time to remove my boots before the doorbell rang. My first thoughts were quite negative, so I even looked through the peephole. But it was only Victor, so I had to open up.

“Sorry, neighbor,” Lydia’s husband nodded awkwardly, holding one hand behind his back. “I need a word.”

“Well, come on in, then.”

“It won’t take a minute,” he replied while still taking a step toward me. “This is for you.”

A fat bottle of cognac was thrust in my face. Three star, according to its bright golden label, provided the manufacturers weren’t lying. I mechanically accepted the gift and looked up at him quizzically.

“Boris brought back two A’s from school today. I haven’t seen him look so happy for quite a while. Now he’s sitting at home learning some poetry or other. Says he needs to bring his literature up to scratch. I asked him about the bully. Guess what he said? ‘Uncle Sergei had words with him and he won’t hassle me anymore.’ So this is just a small token of my gratitude.”

“Oh come on, it was nothing, really. Would you like to come in for five minutes and we can crack open the bottle together?” I pointed at the cognac.

“Oh, no, no. I need to get back and keep an eye on the kids. Lydia needs to go around to her friend’s. Polish it off yourself or with your girlfriend.”

“Which girlfriend?”

“Lydia saw you two together. So she just presumed...”

Sure. His wife was a better source of information that any amount of old gossips and FSB agents. What kind of sex life was one supposed to have?

“All right. Thanks anyway for the cognac.”

“No, it’s you I should be thanking.”

He shook my hand once again and headed off back home. I closed the door and studied the bottle. This wasn’t just any cheap shit. It required a special occasion. You wouldn’t use it as an accompaniment to borsch. Also, I wasn’t refined enough to follow the European habit of having my daily tipple at dinnertime[8]. The innuendo of the last couple of days had even put me off my beer. That was something I had to rectify.

I didn’t even have the time to step away from the door before I heard more ringing. This time it was my cell. Mechanically I put the bottle away in my inventory and pulled out the phone.

Now why wasn’t I surprised?

“Coastal patrol service, how can I help you?” I said.

“What service? Are you talking bullshit again? You’d better tell me now what you’ve decided about my proposition.”

“Excuse me, but I only accept propositions from ladies on Tuesdays and Fridays.”

“Sergei!” judging by Arts’ tone, my good mood hadn’t rubbed off on her.

“What time are you gonna get going?” I asked.

“I planned to leave at midday.”

“How about 2 p.m.? I train in the morning.”

“No problem.”

“Will one day be enough for us to get everything done?”

“Sure.”

“Then make it two p.m. tomorrow at the Gatekeeper’s,” I hung up.

Whistling a tune known only to me — because I’d only just come up with it — I headed to the kitchen, to sample the best borsch under the sun. And by the way, I needed to make sure I ate really well for tomorrow’s training session. With the Oracle, I couldn’t be too sure where my next meal would be coming from.

Chapter 18

GIVE A FOOL ENOUGH ROPE and he'll hang himself. You couldn't exactly call Bumpkin a complete idiot but I hadn't thought about the effects of the herbs I'd given him only yesterday. The moment I woke up and came across my goblin in the corridor, I knew that it was the culprit.

Bulging blood-shot eyes; jerky hand movements; the wet glue glistening on his fur. Talking about which, the entire apartment was covered in wallpaper paste: the floor, the walls, and especially the joints of the freshly-hung wallpaper. He must have wanted to surprise me last night. Unfortunately, his surprise turned out to be much stronger than he'd expected.

"Bumpkin, what the hell's happened here?"

I wasn't angry. I was just in a slight state of shock. Also, I was wondering how I was going to clean it all. He wasn't in a fit state to do jack.

"I'm just papering the walls, pasting and papering, pasting and papering, yeah. My work will last forever. Even when this whole house crumbles, your walls will still stand because it was me, Bumpkin, who hung the wallpaper! I still need to do the corners so that even if there's a tornado, not a single scrap will come loose. I need to make some more paste."

He kept rattling on like a machine gun, constantly vanishing and reappearing. I very nearly had an epileptic fit with all his flickering.

"Bumpkin, stand still! Stand still, I tell you! Give me the brush," I grabbed him by the hand. "Okay, calm down now and follow me."

I took him to my yet-unmade bed and laid him on the sheets just as he was, glue and all, then covered him with a blanket. “Get some sleep.”

“Master, I need to finish it off! I’m not tired...”

“That’s out of the question. You’d better tell me if house goblins have a history of cardiovascular disease?”

“What? Oh, no, no, there’re no heart problems among our bunch. We’re as hard as nails.”

“Good. Now get some rest. That’s an order.”

I went back to the corridor covered in glue and sighed. First of all, I took a few old T-shirts and wiped off all the surplus gunk from the wallpaper. Then I rinsed the bucket and started scrubbing the floors.

A mere half-hour later, I was already standing under the shower, sweaty and tired. Not the best start to the day.

Another surprise awaited me in the kitchen. Bumpkin had polished the whole kitchen with soda — all the forks, cups, plates and the table itself — but had clearly forgotten to wipe it off when he’d had the bright idea of starting to paper the walls. I freed up one of the cups from its soda captivity and made myself some tea. As I warmed up a couple of pies he’d recently made, I decided on no more homeopathics for Bumpkin. Apparently, they weren’t his thing.

By then, my little helper was snoring away like a platoon of recruits after a ten-mile forced march. I had a quick warmup — not in order to bring my stats up but just to get my blood going — then headed off unhurriedly to my training session.

I wouldn’t say I was in a defeatist mood. If you convince yourself you’re gonna lose, you most certainly will. But I had a pretty clear idea of my chances — or rather, how low they really were. Hunter was no spring

chicken and could counter everything, including my admittedly cool development branch. I sifted through all the available options, trying to work out some kind of plan, only to dismiss them all as useless.

Oh well. Looks like I'd have to ad lib as usual.

Hunter was already waiting for me. I activated the Repelling Stone and lay it on the ground, then scooped up some snow and pressed it to my face. It helped. The cold meltwater trickled down my skin, perking me up no end. Everything around me appeared much clearer to me, much more real.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Focus ability.

"Well, let's get on with it!" Hunter said without further ado.

"Yep."

With a satisfied nod, he pulled a spear from his interface bag. It was simple without any bells or whistles, about eight foot long, topped with a long steel head. He deftly threw it from his right hand to his left, drew a figure of eight, flung it into the air, then caught it with his right hand again. The finesse with which he did so led me to conclude that he must have been ambidextrous.

The funny thing was, this realization seemed to have come out of nowhere, which meant this was my Observation at work. The problem was, knowing that my opponent could use both hands in fighting didn't make me feel any better.

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood. In case your life is threatened, your vital energy will be restored from the Seeker's own stocks.

I clicked "Yes" and swiped the message shut. Then I began to advance slowly, clutching my knife in my right hand. But the moment I was

within his reach, my leg got whacked. I clenched my teeth against the burning pain but said nothing.

End of combat

“I thought you’d try to do something,” Hunter chuckled, casting a healing spell on me.

“I didn’t get the chance,” I lied.

As soon as he was done, we returned to our respective positions and started it all over again. Our second round was almost identical to the first one — the sole difference being, this time I received something for my trouble.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 7.

“Shame about your pants,” Hunter said, winding me up. True, there were already two large holes in them. More work for Bumpkin.

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood...

I started moving toward him again. This time I tried to dodge but still got another blow to my leg. More blood, more healing, more sarcasms from Hunter. I listened to them, smiling under my breath. Because I’d already noticed a tendency there. Hunter had not once aimed his spear high. He'd never targeted either my head or my arms, only ever hitting me on the legs. Oh well. It might just be the right moment to react to this.

I allowed him to hit me one more time, just to lull him into a false sense of security. I gritted my teeth in pain, lamented the miserable state of my pants which were by then so ripped they were actually trendy, and staggered back to my feet.

Now was the right time.

The Seeker is inviting you to...

I'd already checked the Katzbalger in my inventory several times, just to be sure. The tab that contained it was already open. Now the most important thing was to be able to whip it out quickly.

I began moving forward in the confident gait of an idiot who never learns from his mistakes. Hunter withdrew his spear, preparing to thrust it at me. The muscles in his arms tensed; his veins bulged; the pupils of his watchful eyes contracted.

Flourish didn't actually work perfectly. I sensed it straight away. Possibly because I had the knife clutched in my right hand, so the spell had to escape through my left arm, exiting in the space between us and crashing onto Hunter — or rather, onto his protective sphere which flashed open, then disappeared again.

Much to my surprise, Hunter didn't cast a new protection. Just as well. Once again the tip of his spear pierced my long-suffering leg.

End of combat

Famous last words.

[∞]

A split second before he attacked, I took a step to the left, killing two birds with one stone: avoiding the blow and moving closer to Hunter. I took a brief swing with my right hand, then exploded into a fit of cussing because I'd missed! I'd missed!

Immediately Hunter tugged his spear back. No, this wasn't going to work. I had to start all over again.

[∞]

A step to the left, the whoosh of Hunter's spear just over my ear, a blow from my moon-steel blade. Bingo! My knife sliced through the spear shaft like a sharp ax through a twig. The spearhead dropped to the ground, while a surprised Hunter was left to retrieve just the remaining shaft. And now he was well within my reach. I leapt forward, drawing my Katzbalger in flight — but once again it was met with an invisible barrier. That's right, his Mantle was back in place. This was a job for my moon steel.

Strangely enough, it failed to pierce the shield, either. How was it possible? I'd already removed Mantle, hadn't I?

A blow from the spear shaft to my temple staggered me. My vision swam. I only had one thought left: I had to remain focused.

[∞]

No idea what had prompted me to rewind time once again. Apparently, Hunter knew some way of activating Mantle without actually casting it. Which rendered all my valiant attempts pretty pointless. But my body had made the decision for me before my brain kicked in. I stepped forward, reducing his spear to a mere stick, then leaped at him and slashed with my Katzbalger. Immediately I ducked, feeling the spear shaft practically make a parting in my hair. I'd almost given up on my knife, seeing it glance off the blue barrier time and time again. Instead, I turned back to my Katzbalger and dealt a slashing blow without even swinging.

Hunter dodged to one side and almost avoided it but I did manage to graze him. The blade ripped through his clothing like through rotten rags and left a small welt on his skin. It had hardly dealt him any damage but apparently, this was enough to provoke a new system message:

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 13.

You've reached level 9.

End of combat. You've won!

I stood before Hunter, looking completely flabbergasted while he stared back at me with more or less the same expression. Finally, he spat on the ground and laughed: a weird hoarse laugh that didn't bode well.

"I still can't believe you did that. It was my own fault. Your initial hapless attacks lulled me into a false sense of security. And I did reckon on you pulling something like that out of the bag! But I didn't expect it until the very last."

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Tactics ability.

His clothes had disappeared: he must have put them away into his inventory. I was faced with a sinewy body covered in a multitude of scars. Some of them seemed to overlap each other; yet more started where the old ones stopped, while some were so old they seemed to merge into the skin. Amid this map of painful trials and tribulations, a new wound stood out bright and straight: one of my own hand.

Hunter produced a small round tube, apparently fabricated within the game. He squeezed some ointment out and began rubbing it into the wound. A familiar scent spread through the air.

"Elufrian ointment?" I said, just to show off my knowledge.

"Yes. Come closer," he said as he finished his treatment and reappeared fully clothed. He produced a huge handful of dust and transformed it into a dark purple crystal. "This is Mantle. That was our agreement, wasn't it?"

The crystal crumbled to ashes in the palm of my hand. Impatient, I immediately checked the spell tab.

Mantle. A one-time spell absorbing all non-magic damage dealt by any throwing weapons, firearms or any close combat weapons.

Cost of use: 100 pt. mana. Duration: 60 min

This must have been the most useful spell of all that I'd lately acquired. I closed my eyes, exhaled and started casting it. I had to spread my hands to the sides, then cross my arms... then turn my palms toward me and touch my chest...

Visually, nothing had changed. Only my ears became blocked as if through a change in air pressure.

"Did it work?" I asked Hunter.

"Yep," he nodded, drew his familiar handgun and fired at me.

It all happened so quickly that I didn't even manage to scream. I just froze there open-mouthed as a tiny dark fleck bounced off some invisible barrier and dropped into the snow. Only then did I realize it was a bullet.

"Holy cow," I gasped. "Please don't do that again. I very nearly became a couple of pounds lighter. I have a question."

"Shoot."

"It took me three attempts to disable your Mantle even though I could see that the first two tries had been registered. How is that possible?"

"Because you can cast Mantle as many times as you want, provided you have enough mana. Look."

He started making the same gestures as I had only a minute ago. The difference was, he kept repeating them time and again. I counted six in total. Then he handed me the gun and stepped away. "Fire it."

I knew he was safe. I'd just seen a bullet glance off my own shield. But still my hands shook. I had yet to become a real Seeker, my excessive humanity still standing in the way. I lingered, plucking up the courage, then took a deep breath and fired.

The gun thundered. My hand jumped from the recoil. Despite the proximity of the target, I'd very nearly missed.

"Again!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang. Hunter didn't budge an inch as the shields fell off him one after another. He just stood there with a faint smile on his lips.

I lowered the gun and wiped away the sweat which had formed on my brow.

"Any more questions?"

"Yes. What's gonna happen next time I wound you?"

He chuckled and stretched out his arm in front of him. The already-familiar cat o' nine tails appeared in it. He made a sarcastic gesture, beckoning me.

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood...

* * *

Predictably, the remainder of the training session was quite boring. I was getting my ass kicked. What did I have to offer against a battle-seasoned warrior once I'd run out of both time rewinds and mana? Also, Hunter was much more cautious now than he used to be.

I ambled home with all the grace of a whooped cur. Bumpkin was still flat out, which put a lid on all my hopes for another dose of his magic elixir. Overcoming pain like a newbie masochist after his first orgy, I rummaged around for a needle and cotton and began fixing my ruined trousers. My handiwork wasn't as perfect as Bumpkin's but still quite passable. It's common knowledge that bachelors are quite good with a needle and thread: they're basically tailors, chefs and chambermaids all rolled into one. Not because they really want to be, but simply because that's what life has thrown at them.

I had some of yesterday's borsch, poured myself a cup of lemon balm tea and got engrossed in my stats. Hello, level 9. I've been looking forward to you for quite a while.

Available points: 3

Strength: 26 (x3)

Intellect: 18 (x)

Fortitude: 26 (x)

Agility: 26 (x)

Stamina: 21 (x)

Rhetoric: 21 (x3)

Speed: 16 (x2)

Strength went without saying because it would give me 15 HP. Ditto for Rhetoric because the bonus was also quite reasonable. But as for Speed... was I really sure I needed it? To all intents and purposes, I should be investing into Intellect because without my trench coat, I wouldn't have enough mana left for even the simplest of spells. Rumis had been right cussing all those "so-called wizards".

I nodded to myself and, ignoring the double bonus to Speed, invested in Intellect.

I then texted Julia wishing her good morning, and stumbled into the shower. My body really needed some kind of pick-me-up pill after suffering such physical abuse. All my muscles were stiff and filled with lactic acid. My leg was covered in a fine web of scars courtesy of Hunter's spear. My entire body felt leaden as if I'd single-handedly unloaded a ten-ton truck. I was so exhausted that I nearly slipped and collapsed on the wet tiles trying to climb out of the shower.

Still, I decided not to drag Bumpkin out of bed. Come on, game, give me another 20 points to karma for being nice! Although, if the truth were known, I was still a bit wary of the state he was in. He might screw something up while preparing his potion and that would be the end of me. I had no desire to be taken out of my house feet first.

I called a cab and hobbled downstairs, grunting and suppressing an occasional groan.

"Hey grandpa, do you have some real skinny guy living here?" the familiar voice asked.

Not again! You'd think it was just another day at work for them. I turned toward the thug who today had only one minion in tow. I had neither the strength nor the will to talk to them today. So I just shook a fist in their direction and croaked in a shaky voice, warming up to the role,

"Goddamn junkies!"

You can say that again. Seeing the two thugs' astonished faces was priceless. I didn't get the pleasure of enjoying their expressions for long, though. I climbed into the back of the cab and pulled out the true mirror. I really looked like an old man. A fedora hat, a warm coat, a neatly trimmed

moustache, a gaunt tired face — I looked like the last surviving intellectual in our ‘hood. No wonder they’d been so astonished to hear me cuss.

The Community was dead quiet. The crunching of snow under my feet echoed through the silence like the soundtrack to a thriller. Where the hell was everyone? I only relaxed when I reached the street leading toward the Gatehouse. A couple of guards were on patrol here, watching what few Players were heading for the Syndicate. Still, there weren’t that many. Had I missed some kind of festival or something?

Arts was already inside waiting for me. She was drawing in her sketchbook, leaning against the wall. Upon seeing me, she stepped out of the shadows and nodded at the Gatekeeper.

“We don’t need to leave our stuff here, do we?” I asked. “Because this isn’t a jump between worlds, right?”

She nodded.

I put my phone back into my pocket. “What’s the fare?”

“Thirty-eight grams. Relax, it’s on me.”

If anything, this made me suspicious. Arts just wasn’t the charitable type. We walked over to the stone. The girl threw the fare into the bowl and said, visibly nervous, “Heraclea.”

“What the hell is Heracl-”

A cloud of fine dust filled the air, cutting my question short. I burst out coughing, which was why it took me some time to realize we’d already arrived. I wiped the tears from my eyes, stood up and repeated my question. “What the hell is Heraclea?”

“The Commoners call it Iraklion, after one of the greatest Seekers of all time.”

“You mean Heracles?”

“That’s one of his names. The Seekers know him under a different name. Stop hassling me. Go buy yourself a book and read up on it.”

“Are there books on the history of the Game?”

“Sure,” my question seemed to surprise her. “There’re books about Seekers, about all sorts of important events, about lots of things. Then again, you only need to ask Litius, he’ll tell you all about it. Quit yapping and let’s go. We still need to rent a mount.”

“To rent a-... Wait a sec! I’m not flying that damn thing again!”

“You don’t have to. We won’t fly: we’ll ride. A nice quick ride,” she tugged at my sleeve.

“You mean, on a snapdrake?” I asked, feeling the soup in my stomach rising like a geyser.

“So you see? You know already!”

“Can’t we hire a cab?” I weakly carried on resisting.

“No, because it would take too long. It’s almost three hours one way. Don’t worry, it’s gonna be all right. You’re not the first one to ride them nor the last.”

“Well, if I’m not the last, it’ll already be a good thing.”

We walked out of the Gatehouse into a street basked in sunlight. Bright rooftops, sand-colored walls and an almost unearthly colorful sea. I felt my lips stretched into a smile. The sea...

“Let’s go already. If we have time, you can do some sightseeing later.”

I nodded. “I’d love a quick dip.”

“Are you mad? The water is barely sixty degrees F! The ‘F’ is for ‘freakin’ cold’.”

“I’ll do it anyway.”

Still, Arts used all her resolve to yank me away from the sea. When a house wall blocked the sight of the azure waters, I finally came back to reality. The magic was gone. Trust Arts to ruin it all.

We kept probing deeper into the city, past pompous residents clad in thin jackets. There weren’t many cars but whenever one drove past, the driver would lean out and speak to us in the local language which I didn’t understand, then switch over to English. A few touts and shopkeepers awoke from their seasonal slumber, raised their heads and tried to attract our attention to themselves. But Arts gave them all short shrift: in English, in Greek and even in Russian.

When we turned off into yet another side street, I realized we’d arrived. Or rather, I sensed a whiff of manure first, followed by sounds similar to neighing. “Similar” being the operative word. No horse could ever make such weird sounds. We walked along a high wall and found ourselves in a large yard lined with stables. You wouldn’t call it exactly crowded. There were three drivers, a *Pilot* — whatever that was supposed to mean — and a street vendor. All of them Players.

Arts beelined for the Pilot. “Hi. My friend and I would like to hire a couple of snapdrakes for the day.”

“It’ll be eight grams each,” the fat suntanned man said, stroking his belly. “But don’t even think about stealing them. Snapdrakes always come back to their master.”

“We weren’t going to. Here’s the money. Only... my friend doesn’t yet know how to ride them.”

“Eh... the skill is four hundred grams.”

“I’ll pay half,” she whispered to me.

I chuckled. They’d brought the cake up to my mouth, now all I had to do was open it. No matter how much I hated all this riding around on magic beasts, her offer was indeed generous. When and where would I ever get anyone to buy me a skill?

Driven by this logic, I produced two hundred grams and handed it to the Pilot. Arts did the same. A few seconds later, he handed me a brown crystal.

My preciousss!

Riding (Agility). The ability to ride and control magic mounts.

You current level of Agility allows you to choose two development options out of the following three: aquatic, land-based or flying creatures. Alternatively, you can choose only one and focus on improving it.

I don’t think so, sorry. If I had the chance to take both heaven and earth, that’s what I’d do, with all my dislike of flying dragons.

“All done,” I said.

“Excellent. While you were busy wasting time, they’ve already found us a couple of snapdrakes,” Arts said.

They were already bringing them towards us. The two snapdrakes looked like horses on steroids, their muscles bulging with every step. The

creatures twitched their ears anxiously, poking out their... oh Jesus. Their tongues were long and forked like a snake's.

"Him first," the Pilot pointed at me. "As it's his first time. Don't be afraid. It's a good snapdrake, well-broken in. He won't go wondering off. He'll always follow his mate. All you need to do is make sure you stay on him."

Very interesting observation, because just as he said it, the snapdrake dropped to his knees, revealing his harness. Which was an overstatement, really. A thick strip of leather ran around his neck, with two thinner straps attached to it. The Pilot's assistants bound them to my hands so tight that my knuckles turned white. Now even if I did fall, I'd be dragged behind it.

"And watch your back. We've had quite a few Commoners disappear around here just lately, and a lot of new Seekers have turned up."

"And what are the guards doing about it?" Arts asked.

"They fine-comb all the cities around. They even sought help from the Seers. All to no avail. Have a good trip. Make sure you bring my snapdrakes back unharmed."

Arts nodded. It took her less than a minute to straddle her own "horse". She turned back to me, trying to suppress a mischievous smile, and dug her heels into the animal's flanks.

Her snapdrake darted off, leaving me in a cloud of dust. My own beast made a funny noise, raised his head and, tilting his neck at a strange angle, turned to look at me, impatience in his eyes. As in, come on now, let's get this party on the road.

There's no word to describe how it felt. My mount could outrun and outmaneuver the fastest cars on earth. Houses, shops, passersby all merged into a single strip of living color. The snapdrake followed a route known

only to him while trying to catch up with his mate, and he didn’t slow down until he’d done so.

Our speed then dropped from “very fast” to just “fast”. And still we barreled on, overtaking cars as if they were standing still. Not once did the lithe creature even brush a side mirror, despite all its power and fleetness of foot.

After only a minute of threading our way through traffic, we’d already cleared the town and taken the coast road running parallel to the sea shore. The wind tousled my hair. My eyes were watering. The tails of my trench coat were fluttering even more than Batman’s cape. Suddenly I came to the conclusion that I really liked it. This was truly great. It felt like I could travel all over the world on this amazing beast.

I let the reins slack and gave him a tiny nudge with my heels. To my amazement, my mount’s head twitched as he picked up speed. Now it was Arts’ turn to catch up with us, but she wasn’t lagging too far behind. The girl was an experienced rider, so very soon she started to take the lead again. But I didn’t intend to give up.

We spent the next half-hour indulging in this amazing, crazy chase powered by adrenaline and an unabashed childish joy. I only reined in my mount whenever Arts did so. Earlier on, we’d already passed yet another town and were now riding through a deserted wasteland. The only buildings we’d gone past were a few snow-white houses with vermillion red roofs by the water edge, one of which sported a cross on top, and an impressive old lighthouse at some distance.

“A church,” Arts said, pointing at the building with the cross. “The Oracle has some sick sense of humor, installing himself next to it. He lives in the lighthouse. Or rather, he used to before the harpies turned up.”

Only now did I notice that the seagulls flocking around the tall spire weren’t seagulls at all. They were too big to be birds... and too humanlike.

“Where’s he now?”

“Somewhere around here,” she unbuckled the reins and dismounted.

I hurried to follow her example, albeit not quite as quick. At least I managed.

“Let’s tether the snapdrakes and look for him,” she added.

“It seems that we won’t even have to look,” I said, pointing at the skinny, almost boyish figure which had appeared in the doorway.

My Insight hadn’t let me down. According to it, this was indeed *the Oracle*. Which made Arts’ reaction appear even stranger because she turned to me, visibly alarmed.

“This isn’t the Oracle.”

“Who do you think it is, then?” I said, handing her over the reins. I drew my knife and headed toward the scared young lad.

Chapter 19

WHEN PEOPLE FIRST MEET, they often wear masks in order to appear better than they actually are. Men lie about their love of shopping, clubbing and Justin Timberlake. Women often take a leaf out of Martha Stewart's book even though they do breathe an occasional sigh of disappointment. A little later, everyone goes back to their actual selves — but the first impression is still a first impression.

Which was why I was so surprised to see the Oracle. He was hunkered down by the wall as if trying to shrink in it: sinewy with a hunched back, calloused hard-working hands and a well-weathered bronze skin, apparently unwilling to look like the powerful being he was.

To top it all, Arts continued flapping that it wasn't the Oracle at all. Who was it, then? My Insight couldn't lie.

I turned to her. "What's he saying?" Greek hadn't been on the list of most common languages offered to me with my Linguistics skill.

"He says it wasn't his fault. It just happened. Something about books and scrolls. Then the harpies came. Wait a sec."

She asked him a question. The Oracle paused, thinking, then replied.

Arts turned to me. "He *is* the Oracle. The new one. According to him, a couple of months ago something happened. He went fishing like he always did, when the world transformed around him. Everything changed. Then he saw lines of text scrolling before his eyes."

"All it means is that the old Oracle is dead," I all but groaned. "Just my luck! Why does it always have to be like this? Why?"

I grabbed the new Oracle by the shoulders and shook him so hard that his head bobbed. “Do you understand me? Why? *Pochemú? Por qué?*”

Arts hung on me, trying to stop me, but her strength was no match for a Korl’s. It was the Oracle himself who saved me from the impending fit.

“I do not know *por qué*, señor. I did not want this.”

“You speak Spanish?”

“A little. You not the first man who came here. And not only man. Others came too... not man, comprende? Many of them. They asked me questions and waited to see what I say. I say to them things that I know... things that I *see*. Some of them left. Others cussed. Life was much better when I lived in the lighthouse. Many books there. I read them all. Found many answers. I can read in strange languages but I do not know how to pronounce the words. Then the flying monsters came. They drive me out of the lighthouse. So I come here to live.”

“Wait a sec,” I stopped him, unable to follow his rapid-fire speech despite my Linguistics. “Did you say books? What kind of books?”

“Sachem say, they’re the last Oracle’s journals. They list everything that happens.”

“Happens when? You don’t mean in the future?”

“Yes. In the future. All the wars. Assassinations of great heroes. The fall of great kingdoms. Everything.”

“When did you say the Sachem came?”

“Three weeks ago. As soon as he heard that the Oracle dead.”

“Did you say great heroes?”

“Yes. I start reading some. But not all.”

“You don’t happen to remember reading something about Savior? Or Destroyer God?”

“Savior, yes, yes! The books say many things about him. But only the past.”

“Nothing about the future?”

“I need to look. Only...” he raised a sinewy arm and pointed in the direction of the lighthouse. Not at the building itself, mind you, but at the murder of harpies circling it.

“When many people come, monsters leave for a while. That’s when people can bring food to us. In other times, they’re always there.”

“Shit, I can’t even count them,” I frowned. “They keep flying around, changing places.”

“Would you like me to ask them nicely to stay where they are?” Arts offered.

“That would be very kind of you. Anyway! What’s your name, my dear Oracle?”

“I’m Sakis.”

“Very well, Sakis. What I want you to do is find a hole somewhere and sit tight in it. Are there any people around here?”

“Sure. Father Theoktist. He’s one of you.”

“Meaning?”

“He’s probably a Seeker,” Arts said. “Now go and hide somewhere, both of you, while we take care of the harpies.”

“Yes! Please do it! Please!”

I watched the Oracle disappear behind the church’s heavy door, then turned to Arts. “Now tell me about these harpy things. Or rather, tell me how you suggest we get rid of them.”

“There’s nothing to tell. They’re semi-sentient. Or sentient, rather, but unlike house goblins they refuse to communicate. They understand human speech and can speak human languages, even though they speak the bird tongue between themselves. Nasty things. They do nothing but shit, drink, steal and make a mess.”

“Do they drink?”

“Ha! They’re worse than beastmen! And they love everything that glitters. They’re not good fighters, though. But there’re at least thirty of them there...”

“So what do you suggest?”

“We could start by pulling the closest ones whenever we get the chance. And then we’ll see. It’s not for nothing I asked you to come. I’d seen you smoke those rachnaids.”

I didn’t tell her that my tactics would have worked against a couple of harpies — or as long as I had enough time rewinds. But a whole flock? That wasn’t going to be as easy.

“Let’s just play it by ear,” I said.

A tarmac road led to the lighthouse and a single outhouse perched next to it, connecting them to the outside world. Concrete electric poles hung with cables ran the entire length of the road. Harpies were sitting on

the ground all around them, imperious and noisy. Thanks to our snapdrakes, we could ignore the rough ground: the mounts effortlessly carried us across the thin strip of bay and the rocky shore. The problem was, now we were cut off from the rest of the world. Not the best place to launch an attack.

I was about to suggest that we make a detour, riding our mounts into the harpies' rear which would give us much more room to maneuver. But Arts was already a good thirty feet in front of me. When I finally caught up with her, she pulled a staff out of her bag and waved her hand in the direction of the nearest harpy.

"I might just get her," she said. "It can't be more than fifty feet."

"Try it. Just be careful," I said without taking my eyes of the "semi-sentient creature". Life had prepared me for lots of things, all the way to a two-hour Justin Bieber gig, but I definitely hadn't been prepared to see a live harpy.

Saying she was an abomination would be an understatement. She was small — standing a good foot shorter than Arts — and covered in long gray feathers. Her face was that of an old woman, but with a beak in place of a nose and mouth. Her chest sported something reminiscent of woman's breasts which luckily for me were covered in short white down. Her human arms were short with long sharp nails on her hands. The talons on her hind feet were sharp like daggers. Just as I watched, the harpy was busy standing on one leg sharpening them with her beak. Who did she think she was, a freakin' flamingo?

Arts didn't let me down. Her staff spewed flame which hit the "bird", singeing its feathers.

The girl turned back to me and smiled, raising her staff in a triumphant hand. But I saw no reason for being so cheerful. The entire murder of harpies had taken to the wing, squawking and snapping their beaks. One of them was considerably lighter in color, bigger and noisier than all the others, drowning their screams out with her own screeching.

[∞]

I barely managed to push Arts' staff upwards. The fireball missed the harpy who raised her head, gave us a surprised look and continued sharpening her talons.

"What do you think you're doing?" Arts demanded.

"That's not a good idea. As soon as you kill her, the whole flock will attack us. And they seem to have something like a leader, an alpha. Can you see her over there sitting on the roof of the outhouse?"

"How do you..." Arts began. Then her eyebrows shot up. "That's how you did it! I wondered what it was! I couldn't understand how a newb like you could crit all those rachnaids!"

"That's irrelevant," I interrupted her musings. "You'd better tell me how we can kill them now."

"Good question," Arts muttered.

"How many talons do you need to collect?"

"At least a dozen pairs. Ideally, the more the merrier. There're some bonuses included. I might have to call up a team again. Get our guys' asses here and share the reward with them. The problem is, you never know how pissed your juicehead friend might be."

"Of course!" I very nearly slapped my forehead. I reached into my inventory and produced the bottle of cognac. "This is our secret weapon."

"That's not enough for this bunch."

I grinned. “But that’s not all,” I dipped my hand in again, producing the nepenthe leaves. “My great-grandf- er, the guy who gave it to me said it makes good Oblivion potion, provided the proportion is right. Scrap the proportion bit. Let’s just mix it all together and see what it does.”

“You know what? It might actually work,” Arts said pensively. “Come on, then.”

We found a relatively flat rock. Arts pointed at it:

“You need to chop the nepenthe as finely as you can... Oh no, not with moon steel! Put it back! It’ll slice right through the stone.”

I nodded and reached for my Katzbalger. Can’t say it was very convenient: a sword is a poor replacement for a kitchen knife. On the other hand, the herb wasn’t some ordinary parsley, either. I was really afraid that the plant might start working straight away, so I was very cautious, making sure that not a single drop of juice splashed on my face; I even tried to breathe as little as I possibly could.

“Are you finished yet?” Arts asked, producing a crude wooden cup and a pestle out of her sketchbook.

“One moment,” I said, still chopping. “There you go. Take it.”

I lifted the rock in my hands. Arts gingerly brushed the green mess into the cup, making sure to collect the few droplets of juice. She then began grinding it with the pestle, moving with practiced precision.

I was about to compliment her on her apparent expertise but reconsidered. You never know these days. If you commend a girl’s cooking skills, she might brand you as an old-fashioned male chauvinist who sees her as a household appliance. If you comment on her good looks or shapely forms, you’ll be a potential rapist who only views her as a sex object. And if you hold a door open for her or offer your assistance with anything at all, that might make you a misogynic bastard. True, today’s women don’t need

a man’s strong shoulder in their lives — in which case they shouldn’t brand said men as wusses. They aren’t. They’re just too wary of saying or doing something inappropriate.

“That’s about it,” Arts weighed the cup in her hands. “No idea if that’ll be enough. Alchemy isn’t my forte.”

“Likewise. But as they say, you can’t win if you don’t try. Especially as we have plenty of guinea pigs... or is it guinea birds? If it doesn’t work, we’ll have to think of something else.”

“Open the bottle.”

“Just a sec.”

I ripped the plastic seal off the cap, opened the bottle and drew in the noble bouquet. Dammit, this stuff was really good. I lifted the bottle and took a couple of swigs. Sorry about my manners, folks.

“Hey!” Arts poked me in the shoulder.

“I need some space for the juice,” I explained, gasping. “Come on, pour it in. Be careful.”

After a few more minutes of collecting every drop of the precious liquid and squeezing the dregs dry, we were looking at a bottle of excellent jury-rigged absinth. I cautiously sniffed it but all I could smell was fine barrel-aged liquor. Not a faintest hint of nepenthe. Shame we had no lemon.

“Come on, let’s go, then,” I said, putting the cap back on.

We moved slowly and carefully. I still remembered the earlier version of our future where all the birds had taken to the wing as soon as we’d wounded one of them. But now they didn’t seem to care, showing no intention of attacking us. Even the one that had been sharpening her talons

had now fluttered over to a new spot at a distance and kept a careful watch on us from the safety of her new spot.

“The way I look at it, we can’t just set the bottle on the ground and leave.”

“They’re not stupid. They’ll know straight away it’s a trap.”

“Okay. Let’s go over there, then.”

We walked uphill toward the lighthouse along the dirt road which connected it to the church. The road was quite smooth; someone had even bothered to clean it of all the rocks. Perfect.

I “accidentally” dropped the bottle on its side, making sure it started rolling back where we’d come from. Then I poked Arts on the shoulder. “Scream! Shout something!”

Arts theatrically threw her hands in the air. “*Oh no!*”

Too many Oscarless actors around me just lately.

The bottle started rolling downhill, its golden label glistening in the sun. For a harpy, this was one hell of a prize.

This particular harpy just couldn’t resist it. She shot up into the air and darted past us toward the bottle still rolling down the slope. Her talons closed around her trophy. As she headed back, I even got the impression that she squealed something unflattering at us as she flew, apparently in the vein of “losers weepers”.

Still, her celebration didn’t last. As soon as she landed and started studying her prize, other harpies too caught sight of the bottle. She did manage to open the bottle and even take a few swigs before her sisters came. Feathers went flying as they sent the bottle round, screaming and squabbling.

Then the chief harpy came and promptly instilled the fear of God in them. The noise died out.

Having restored the pecking order, the biggest harpy sniffed the drink, snapped her beak as if saying something, and started taking large gulps. I'd never seen anyone drink so much or so long without stopping, not even Professor on the morning after. When she finally stopped, there was virtually nothing left in the bottle — a few ounces at most. And after her second go at it, even less so.

Already tipsy, the chief harpy flung the bottle aside. Luckily, it hadn't broken. The cheekiest and greediest of her flock immediately descended upon it, fighting over the dregs, until they finished our makeshift poison to the last drop.

Your reputation has changed to Poisoner.

"I wonder how long it takes to work?" I said, scratching the back of my head.

"Could be anything. Let's wait."

Luckily, the universe must have taken mercy on me because my cell rang. My mom. I hesitated, not sure whether I should pick it up, but finally swiped the green button.

"Hi Mom. Is it urgent? I'd better call you back. I'm on roaming right now."

"You really think I would have bothered you if it wasn't urgent? Wait a sec... what do you mean, you're on roaming?"

"I'm out of town."

"Do you need roaming just for that?"

“Well, I’m on the regional limit.”

“But I read the other day that we don’t need roaming within the country?”

“Okay Mom, it really doesn’t matter,” I said, feeling my ears redden. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing yet. But maybe tomorrow. Lily is bringing her young man to meet the family. That’s why we’re having a family dinner together.”

“Mom, can you do all that without me? No one’s asking for my blessing, if you know what I mean.”

“Your father really wants you to be there.”

This was something new! I very nearly said that had he wanted it so badly, he could have called me himself. Then I shook my head in disbelief: I couldn’t really remember when he’d called me last. He always delegated these kinds of tasks to his personal assistant a. k. a. his wife.

“What time?” I asked.

“Seven o’clock. Lily is coming after work.”

“All right, I’ll be there.”

“Thanks. See you soon.”

I hung up, already anticipating some awkwardness at the dinner table. The fact that I didn’t have to propose to anyone was already good news.

I saw a message from Julia and even managed to reply to it when Arts distracted me from it.

“I think it’s coming on,” she whispered.

I switched my gaze from my phone to our feathered brethren. Or rather, sisters. Nothing up until now was really happening. Having polished off the admittedly excellent cognac, they had returned to their usual routine of preening, quarreling, flying lazily along the shore and shitting over everything, excuse my French.

“Why, what did you see?” I asked.

“Over there, look,” she pointed at a particularly noisy group.

She was right. They’d already moved from just words to being physical, soaring in the air and ripping each other’s chests apart with their daggerlike talons. Feathers went flying; blood was gushing everywhere; the air was blue with their avian cussing. This was a fight to the death.

“This is what happens if you don’t get the dose right,” I said, scratching my forehead.

“I think what happened was that Oblivion transformed into Amnesia. They just don’t recognize each other anymore. Look!” she pointed in the direction of the spire.

A real slaughter was unfolding in the air above it as the chief harpy was trying to fight off her aggressive minions. Their dead bodies were already piling up below although their attacks had taken their toll on the alpha bird too. She flapped along on her wounded right wing, trying to gain height. You didn’t need to be a clairvoyant to realize she was finished.

As if in confirmation of my musings, another set of talons sank deep into her throat and ripped out a good lump of flesh.

Arts winced. “This is hardcore.”

“You should be happy. All the less work for you. The only question remains, how on earth the new Oracle is going to clean all the blood away.”

Not that I was that worried. Eventually, the melee began to subside as most birds had either found their death at the talons of their inebriated peers, or were seriously wounded. The only exceptions were about a dozen harpies who’d been too timid to have claimed their share of the magic drink. They huddled together in the air, hovering over the sea about fifty yards away from the lighthouse.

Your fame has increased to 6.

“Time to do some harvesting,” I said, suppressing my squeamishness.

Arts didn’t seem to be in a hurry to test her luck, apparently hoping that the wounded harpies would eventually die. Still, they proved to be a hardy bunch, so I had to use my Katzbalger on quite a few of them.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 14.

All I’d had to do to receive this message was decapitate three of the wounded. Arts followed in my wake, cutting off their talons. By the way, our actions hadn’t gone unnoticed. The group of teetotaler harpies had started screaming its protest as soon as I had done away with the first bird. The further we advanced, the more their indignation grew. No idea what the last straw for them was, but they all took to the wing and came for us.

“It’s okay, we can manage,” Arts said, producing her staff.

“Wait a sec, I wanna try something. Then you can do your thing, okay?”

Once they were within my range, I started making circular motions with my arms. The Electric Field appeared unexpectedly — at least for the two harpies who were in the lead. They indeed seemed to be stuck in it,

their wings moving slowly, their beaks opening in silent squawks. Yet another harpy had also become trapped in the Field just behind them. Visually, they hadn't changed at all but the moment the spell stopped working, they dropped like stones to the ground, barely alive from exhaustion.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 11.

"Can I do it now?" Arts shouted.

"Please do!"

She had time to fire her staff twice, even shooting down one of the birds. Then she flung it aside, raised her hands to the sky and summoned what looked to be Lightning Chain or something similar — you'd better ask the three harpies which were pinned to the ground with it.

The surviving monsters wisely decided to retreat. Only one of them, apparently not quite understanding what was going on, spread her talons and went for Arts, squawking viciously. Just you wait!

My sword blade missed its target — but the harpy's attack didn't. Arts fell to the ground with a shriek, bleeding. I felt like a child who'd tried to catch a falling vase, failed and busted the television as well. How embarrassing.

[∞]

Bang! The Katzbalger wasn't the same as moon steel. I felt the blade give a little as it pierced the harpy. Still, it was enough to take her wretched head off.

Arts screamed.

I swung round. Had she been attacked again? No, she was standing there as right as rain, in spite of being covered in blood courtesy of the harpy that hadn't quite made it to her.

"You're welcome. You'd better just tell me how many times I've saved your butt now."

"Don't worry, I have it all notched up," she pulled a rag out of her sketchbook and started wiping her face. "You'll get it all back in one lump payment."

"Where are they going now?" I asked, pointing at the few harpies who'd survived and were now heading to sea.

"No idea. They'll find some island or other and hunker down. There're too few of them."

"Have you cleaned yourself up? Good. Could you please go and fetch the Oracle while I gather all the remaining talons? We've carried out our side of the deal. Now it would be good if he could enlighten us about certain things we need to know."

Chapter 20

FAILED EXPECTATIONS can be a terrible thing. You'd have it all so nicely envisioned and planned in your head, and then it all goes to the dogs. You'd meet a girl on the internet and arrive at your first date, and then... well, your date's face is the same but the rest of her might not live up to your expectations. Or you start reading a heroic fantasy book and in chapter three, the author introduces a virgin that has a bunch of heroic kings swooning after her for the rest of the book. Or your parents might invite you to a BBQ at their country house and when you arrive, they ask you to help with the gardening and fix a busted window or a listing fence.

As I opened the lighthouse's sturdy door, I must have expected to see something extraordinary. At the very minimum, a branch of the legendary ancient Alexandrian Library. But I found myself inside a — a lighthouse?

A spiral staircase led upwards. The smell of brine and wet wood tickled my nose. Dust crunched underfoot: not magic dust, but the natural stuff. So where do you look for the old Oracle's journals here?

"Over here," Sakis called us.

He walked over to a small ring in the floor and pulled it, opening a trapdoor. Thank God for that! I'd already begun to worry that the fabled journals were just a fat dog-eared exercise book.

A rough staircase had been cut into the rock. We went down and found ourselves in a large room. It must have been badly ventilated, judging by the fact that the oil lamp in Sakis' hands just refused to be lit. As he fiddled with it, I activated Light and looked around me in surprised amazement.

How much work had it taken to cut this room out of the rock? Years or decades? Had the old Oracle toiled alone or had he had a team of hired workers helping him? How had he managed to bring all the bookcases down here, which were now groaning under the weight of ancient tomes? He must have put the bookcases together down here.

“All done,” Sakis raised the oil lamp in his hand, looking terribly pleased with himself. The light fell on my arm. His face fell when he saw it. “Sachem say I can study spells too. But I need ash.”

“Dust,” I corrected him in Spanish.

“That’s right. Dust. But I gave the last dust I had to the Syndicate. They promise to find Seekers who can kill the harpies.”

“All Seekers visit the Oracle sooner or later,” Arts said pensively, studying one of the book spines. “You could always charge them for your services.”

The suggestion of such a simple scheme surprised him no end. He froze, open-mouthed, then nodded quickly. “Good idea. If I do this, I don’t need money. How much would you like to pay?”

I frowned. “You’ve got a cheek, dude. We’ve just given you your lighthouse back and even suggested a relatively honest way of making money. And you seem to be just on the make.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d managed to convey the entire scope of meaning in Spanish, but he must have got the gist of it because he raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture, turned round and began fussing around the bookcases.

“This is about Savior. But it’s boring. It’s about all the magic he used when he lived among people. In those days, the rules did not apply to Seekers. Now they do, Sachem told me. And this book say about Savior traveling between worlds. Do you know when he came back to Cesspit?”

“When he was thirty-three years old?” I offered a guess.

“Yes,” he smiled, turning back to the bookcases. “And this book is about what he did later. About his disappearance. Here, I found it!”

If the truth were known, the loose pages in the Oracle’s hands could hardly qualify as a book. More like a couple of manuscripts covered in neat handwriting. The language was like nothing I’d ever seen before. I couldn’t work out a single word of it, so I turned back to Sakis. “What’s it about?”

“This is record of things that haven’t yet happened. Sometimes I see things like these too. My thoughts hard to control. Sachem say it’s normal. He say it will come with time.”

“That’s great news. Do you think you can read some of this to us?”

“Yes.”

His voice changed. Now it was strong and dignified, sententious even. “A second Savior will arrive in the first one’s wake. The Avatar will find him, the worthy one amidst all the vain, cowardly and power-loving, the one who will step into a god’s footsteps and will follow a god’s path. But soon he will become doubtful, because his life will be full of trouble and despair. His loved ones are only mortal and will soon expire like matchlight in a forest fire. The Savior needs to rise above his kind: a Seeker who blazes his own path amid the confusion. In order to find what he seeks, he needs to reject beaten trails and make his own. Many will attempt to stand in his way, and they will be from among the strongest and most powerful. First the White One, who will gouge the path for the other three: Red, Black and Pale. And after the second Savior meets them all, his spark will expire. A new flame will be born-”

“Which flame?” I asked, licking my suddenly parched lips.

“No comprendo,” Sakis replied in his old apologetic tone. “Page is missing.”

I turned to Arts. “So what do you think of all this?”

The expression in her eyes made my blood run cold. She stared into space like she’d just seen a ghost.

“You okay?”

“This is bad,” she said. “This is really, really bad.”

“Can you explain?”

“I know who they are. The ones who’re gonna stand in your way. They’ve been our biggest nightmare for a long long time. Every Player knows their names: Morbian, Slayer, Austerius and Omega. You can’t imagine the things they did! Even the Commoners shudder when they hear about them.”

“Do I know them too?”

“Oh yes, you do. Wait a sec,” she pulled out her cell and dialed a number. “Shit. No signal. I’ll have to step out for a moment.”

I turned to Sakis. “Do you understand any of it?”

“No. But I know the name. Morbian... wait.”

He began rummaging through the manuscripts, muttering under his breath. Looking at him, I wondered if he’d been made the new Oracle for a reason. A Greek fisherman of Spanish origin (or vice versa) who had probably never paused to think about the futility of existence and other such highbrow metaphysics, was now frowning his brow in concentration as he leafed through the ancient records of one of the most powerful creatures who’d ever graced Cesspit with their presence.

According to Hunter, you could only become a Seeker by sheer chance. You had to be somewhere nearby a dying Player in order to harvest his or her identity. But now — right now at this very moment — I was beginning to doubt his words. What if it wasn't chance at all?

"I found it," Sakis said. "A very old record. Not easy to read. Only a few little bits. I can try."

I nodded. "Please."

He spent some time staring at the page mouthing the words, then began reading out loud.

"He's not the strongest of the four brothers but definitely the canniest one. His family nickname is Conqueror, as scornful and sarcastic as only one's family members can get. But it was Morbian, the blond brother, who surpassed his other siblings in what they call the Tourney: a turf war which made the bigger part of this world shudder from their power games. It was Morbian who'd empowered Etzel, the Seeker better known to commoners as Attila. Had it not been for Omega who'd had Etzel killed as part of his plot against his own brother, Morbian might have achieved some remarkable... I can't read what it says here. There're two more lines in the end: in view of what Morbian has done to his own brothers, he's considered the most dangerous of any Seekers conspiring against the Order. Signed: Probobоscus, the Seer."

I scratched the back of my head. "It's as clear as mud."

"Sergei, we need to go," Arts said, returning to the room. "I can't get through to Litius. If there's anyone who might tell us more about it, it's him."

"Wait a sec. I'm still waiting to get the answer to my question from the Oracle. True, I haven't asked it yet but..."

“You helped me. Now my turn. But,” Sakis said with begging notes in his voice, “I don’t know how it happen. I see pictures and words. They just come. I can’t explain.”

“We could try. So,” I took in a lungful of air, still reluctant to utter my question aloud. Or rather, too wary of hearing the actual answer. Still, I forced myself to say it. “How do I find the Choruls?”

The Oracle just stood there for a while, staring at me incomprehensively. I got the impression that he simply hadn’t heard the last word I’d said.

Then something happened. His eyes glazed over. The fear which used to cover his face in a fine web of wrinkles had crumbled to ashes. His shoulders straightened, his chest swelled up. Now he did look the part of a majestic Oracle who spreads age-old lore with his words of wisdom.

“You have half of what you need to take the path which will lead you to them. In finding the rest, you’ll also find the key.”

I waited for more words — for something more specific, maybe, — but his eyes were already alive again. He blinked fearfully, deflating, his back stooping, as he cast glances at me and Arts.

“The old Oracle was a bit more generous with words,” Arts said.

“Don’t push him,” I said. “He did warn us, didn’t he? I think I know what he means, anyway. Well, thanks, Mister Sakis. You’ve got your home back. Good luck! You’ll need it.”

“It’s me who should thank you. You help me very much.”

“Just forget it,” I shook his hand and started back upstairs.

The two snapdrakes anxiously hooved the ground as if tethered to a burning tree. I looked around but saw no one. Strange creatures. They might

be sensing the dead harpies' blood.

"We really need to go and see the local Sachem," I said. "He might post some guards over here. At least temporarily until Sakis is capable of defending himself."

"Why would we do that?"

Her question floored me. I shrugged and opened my mouth to offer some kind of reply but failed to do so straight away.

"What if someone tries to do something to him?" I finally offered.

"It's got nothing to do with us."

"Hey, what's wrong with you? Do you hate him so much?"

"What's that got to do with it? He's okay. It's just that he's a total stranger. Just yet another Seeker out of thousands."

"Who am I, then?"

Unexpectedly for me, my question seemed to have flustered her. She turned away, pretending to be rearranging her snapdrake's gear.

"That's different," she finally said. "Instead of trying to look too deep into it, you'd better ask yourself some really important questions."

"Like what?"

"Like who could have killed the old Oracle who was a really ancient creature, one of the wisest and most powerful Seekers in the whole of Cesspit."

That was a million-dollar question, wasn't it? It had sort of escaped me. Arts had a point, actually. A Magister could see a very vague picture of

a person’s future. A Grand Master could do the same with the person’s past. But the Oracle was capable of seeing all the potential development lines of every creature, Seekers’ as well as commoners’. To say that he’d failed to foresee his own death or recognize his killer would be preposterous. Just as preposterous as the Chorul’s death at the hand of a commoner.

The coincidence made me really uncomfortable.

I cast desperate looks around me, searching for any potential enemy, but discovered none. I still stood on the breezy shore awash with the soft rolling waves of the wintry sea. The place was deserted. Even the church door hadn’t opened as if there was no one inside, even though we’d already announced that the place was free of harpies. Or was I just being paranoid? I sure as hell hoped so.

“What are we gonna do now?” I asked Arts.

“Go home,” she said, untethering her mount. “I have a bad feeling about this cozy little getaway. I need to take the talons to the Syndicate. And we’ve got to talk to Litius. Why? You wanna stay here?”

“No, not at all,” I said, reaching for my mount’s reins.

Still, I had this nagging feeling that hadn’t gone anywhere, curling up like a treacherous snake in the deepest corner of my heart. I mounted my snapdrake and wound the leather straps nice and tight around my hands. I seemed to be getting the knack of it. Then I gently heeled the animal’s fat shiny flanks.

The air current tousled my hair which had by now grown quite a bit. My eyes watered; my neck felt fresh from the wind. Once again, Arts took the lead but I had no intention of either catching up or playing tag with her. I was too preoccupied thinking of other things.

How could you kill an unkillable Seeker? The answer was, only if he wanted you to kill him. That was exactly what had happened to the

Chorul and what had most likely happened to the Oracle, too.

The question was, why?

We'd already passed the nearest town and come out onto the highway, overtaking an occasional car. Our route lay along the coast past the picturesque views of the grim sea mourning the end of the holiday season. It was probably already missing all the tourists. Sure, I'd choose a wintry Aegean Sea over the arctic Barents Sea in summer any day, but...

I must have slackened my guard, forgetting about the little worm of doubt that kept gnawing at me all this time, and regretted it straight away. My mount's muscles tensed as if trying to overcome some resistance. The animal lowered his head and stopped in full gallop with his legs wide apart.

Predictably, this kind of emergency braking threw me out of the saddle, sending me flying through the air. Had it not been for the leather straps tethering me to the animal, I might have landed a good hundred feet away. As it was, I somersaulted through the air and slammed nice and hard against the mount's powerful chest.

[∞]

"Arts, stop now!"

I reined my mount in so hard I must have almost suffocated him. He stopped in mid-flight, shifting his weight to his hind legs and rearing up. Had it not been for the leather straps, I'd have already been lying on the ground. As it was, I was still astride him, looking around me in panic.

Arts hadn't been so quick to react. Her she-snapdrake collapsed as if someone had chopped her hind legs off and somersaulted forward, taking Arts with her. The poor animal landed on her neck and stopped moving.

Easy death. The Pilot would be absolutely livid though.

But that was nothing compared to Arts' problems who was now buried under the animal's multi-ton bulk. Judging by the grimace of pain on her face and her leg bent at a strange angle, she was in a bad way.

I unwound my tethers and got myself free. Still, I didn't rush headlong to help her. First, I took a good look around.

I saw a small hill at some distance from the road and some cliffs by the water's edge. Had I been some devious bastard wishing to attack unsuspecting travelers, I'd have set up a lookout on top the hill. Not only the view was better from there but it also made it way harder to get to me.

I cast Mantle and reached for my Katzbalger.

Your Modification skill has increased to level 2.

Arts was biting her lip, suppressing a groan. It took all of my presence of mind not to rush to her aid. Because this must have been exactly what my invisible enemy on top of the hill expected me to do. They wanted me to lower my guard and turn my back to them. Snapdrakes don't just lose their footing for no reason: there must have been a magic barrier here somewhere.

Which meant that we'd been expected.

I had 45 pt. mana, enough for three more time rewinds. Which didn't bode well if I had more than a couple of opponents to tackle.

My heart was racing as I approached the hill, step by cautious step, sword at the ready. I blew a quick breath and lunged forward.

No one.

I must have been mistaken. The thought flashed through my head faster than I could grasp it — or was it even a thought?

My mind imploded.

REALITY RETURNED surprisingly quickly. Or so I thought. Still, it felt strange to say the least. I could still hear the sound of the sea; I could smell a foul, heavy stench hanging in the air but I couldn't see anything. I tried to move but my hands were tied behind my back. What the hell?

"He's come round," a smarmy voice cooed.

Just as he said it, my vision cleared and I could finally see.

I was in a cave. A bonfire was casting shadows which danced along its walls. The floor was wet with something which glistened with the reflections of the flames. Further on, I could see a pile of heaped-up canvas bags. Next to them, Arts lay unconscious. A small pot was boiling on the fire.

A filthy-looking dude stood in front of me. He was short with sharp features and a predatory gaze. His large tatty padded coat streaked with crimson stains and a sailor's shirt tucked into his short pants gave the overall impression of a Robinson Crusoe who'd gone bananas from solitude.

"I was afraid you might die," he said. "What a waste of blood. The blood of a dead man isn't as fascinating. Don't worry, you will fulfil your destiny."

"What destiny? Who the hell are you?"

Actually, I already had a bit of an answer to this question. According to my Insight, this was an *Observer*. But I needed more information.

"My name is Talsian. At least that's what they called me before. Now my name is *Please Let Me Go* or *What Do You Want From Me*."

He giggled again, making it perfectly clear to me that he was completely off his rocker. Talsian... Talsian... I had a funny feeling I'd heard that name before.

"People are so talkative these days," he continued. "Everyone wants to have a good blab before they snuff it. They beg and plead, some even threaten me. Heh heh. But neither Seekers nor Commoners have any idea that they're all but vessels for me. Vessels full of blood."

Talsian! Now I remembered. The blood mage wanted for murders. Just my freakin' luck. If before I had any hope of striking a deal with him, now it had completely disappeared. You couldn't get anywhere with this idiot. Which meant there was only one way out, and that was death.

"Talsian, have you heard what Sachems say about blood?"

"What can those idiots possibly tell me?" he said with a smile. Still, I noticed him lean forward.

In theory, he was already within attacking range. Still, I wanted to play it safe. I lowered my voice. Now Talsian had to strain his ears just to hear the gibberish I'd started feeding him. Gradually he moved closer, cautiously step by step, until there were about fifteen feet between us. Close enough, in my estimation.

I knew I could cast Righteous Fire even with my hands tied behind my back. Don't ask me how — I just knew it.

For a brief moment, light flooded the cave, allowing me to see the tiniest detail. The sacks heaped up by the walls were in fact human bodies. Most of them already dead, but some still alive. Admittedly weak and covered in cuts and bruises but alive.

Just then Righteous Fire expired. Once again the place was submerged in gloom, the weak glow of the bonfire a joke after the brilliance of the spell. Still, I managed to make out the mage's motionless body, his

blackened skin and singed hair, his burnt clothes fused with his body — and his charred arm with which he'd tried in vain to shield his face.

The problem was, Talsian had no intention of crumbling to dust as any regular Seeker would do. He stirred, cackled his horrible giggle and came at me.

Chapter 21

WHEN ALL ESTABLISHED and widely accepted rules begin to crumble, man tends to fall into a stupor. What would you do if you fired a Glock at someone's head and he just brushed it off and walked away? All you'd do you just stand there with your mouth open trying to come up with a logical explanation of what you'd just seen.

That's exactly how I felt right now. Righteous Fire dealt 5000 pt. damage, ignoring any kind of defenses. Considering the 30 HP the game had dealt me at the start of my "playing career", this ability was a veritable wonderwaffle. And this bastard was alive and kicking. My attack had caused him some degree of discomfort, not much more.

"Silly, silly Seeker," my barbecued opponent shuffled off and spread his arms wide.

Several of the bodies by the wall sprouted thin intertwining crimson threads which reached out to him. The moment they touched Talsian's body, they disappeared.

He turned back to me. He now looked absolutely normal: no charred skin, no mangled face.

Oh no! He was a blood mage, wasn't he? He could restore himself by syphoning his victims' powers.

"How?" I asked mechanically. "How did you survive?"

"Silly Seeker doesn't know who I am!"

"I do. You're an Observer."

“So why did you try to kill me, then? Ah! You knew who I was but you had no idea of the extent of my power, did you?” he cut his cackling short, pinned me with his stare and pointed his finger at me. “You don’t know who I am! You’ve no idea!”

“Tell me, then,” I said, testing my bonds inconspicuously. He might have been a good blood mage but his knotting skills wouldn’t make him a good boy scout. I might not be able to untie myself completely but I should be able to free up one hand. No idea what I was supposed to do with it, though, if this guy was virtually unkillable. But at least I should give it a try.

“I used to be a weak sickly child,” he began calmly, his hand fluttering in the air as if he was playing an invisible piano. Then his demented eyes focused on me as he rapidly blurted, “But why would anyone be interested in such petty details? I became a Seeker because I’d been chosen. That bastard Oracle can say what he wants. According to him, it was because someone got killed... but it’s irrelevant, anyway.”

“So that’s how you became an Observer,” I said, steering him back onto the right path.

“That’s right. Only it took me a long time to work it out. And then the Oracle... that bastard! That nasty, awful creature!”

“So you came to see him and asked him your question,” I realized.

“I did! He said I’d become the bloodthirstiest Player that had ever lived. The bloodthirstiest, can you imagine? But he also told me about this Observer thing. If I learned how to focus while observing something, I could improve my parameters, such as strength, mana and vigor, whatever I wanted.”

“Then you should have observed butterflies,” I said as I inconspicuously tugged my hand one way, then the other.

My comment seemed to have infuriated him. “I tried everything!” he splattered, his face distorted by anger. “Nothing worked. Nothing at all. And then one day,” his voice became soft and smarmy again, “I happened to witness a car crash. A heavy truck rammed a car, literally wrapping it around the guardrail. I just stood there watching as the woman in the car bled to death. That felt... wonderful. And then I received my first points which I could invest in mana. That’s when I understood that blood was the most powerful and potent substance in the world. The essence of life. And if I wanted to become stronger, this was the element I had to *observe*.”

“Then you should have got yourself a job at a blood transfusion center,” I said, tugging at my bonds. They were almost loose.

“Five days later, I had my first kill. He was a commoner, a worthless tramp with no home or family. No one would have missed him. You’ve no idea how good I felt watching his blood flow from him.”

He closed his eyes in bliss, reliving his first murder. In the meantime, I freed my hand entirely and wiggled it to restore circulation.

“Then there was no stopping me. All those homeless tramps. Dozens, hundreds of them. I wasn’t in a hurry. After all, I had an eternity in front of me. But soon I realized one thing. The blood of society misfits ceased to bring me pleasure. It still gave me points to add to my stats. But the pleasure was gone.”

He tut-tutted and dissolved into soft laughter. “That’s when I drew the attention of the Guards. Apparently, you can’t kill commoners. Bullshit! Very well, so I switched to killing Seekers. But they didn’t like that, either. There’s no pleasing them.”

“Why did you kill the Oracle?” I asked, drawing my moon steel knife from my inventory and squeezing it hard.

“I came to tell him he was a charlatan. He should have explained to me the right way to use it straight away. He started telling me that the game

had no provision for such abominable abuse. He was very chatty," Talsian added with a predatory smile. "He told me lots of things. But most importantly, he said he couldn't kill me. By then, I was already a serious student of blood magic. I bought a few things and improved a few others myself. Even now I'm in the process of creating new stuff," he said vaguely, pointing at the pot boiling on the fire.

It was nothing special: two wooden supports stuck in the ground, with a strong crossbar from which the pot dangled. One would have thought there was something boiling in it but I could hear nothing.

"Aldoss steel," the mage said, following the direction of my stare. "It's used for making magic potions. It absorbs the energy of fire and transfers it to the potion I'm cooking."

"What's that? Something for diarrhea?" I asked without taking my eyes off him.

"This potion will allow me to draw blood runes by the power of thought alone. I'll only need to think about it, and people will start bleeding to death — from their eyes, their ears, their noses, even from under their nails. I'll enter a city, go straight to the main square and kill hundreds in one go. Imagine the beauty of it! Hundreds of people squirming on the ground bleeding! And then thousands! Tens of thousands!"

"Yeah, sure. You'll outperform every cinema in the country with such a show. The problem is, you still need to live to see it through."

There was no point in waiting any longer. Talsian was now wallowing in his sick wet dreams, completely unprepared for an attack. I gave him mental thanks for not tying my hands too securely.

As I staggered to my feet, momentum propelled me forward a couple of steps. A third step brought me face to face with Talsian, with my knife raised to strike.

Strangely enough, he didn’t appear to be scared. His face distorted with malice. But I’d already struck. The knife’s blade sank deep into his chest right up to the hilt.

“Silly Seeker.”

He spread his arms wide, then dropped them. My vision darkened; my temples began to throb, as if a hundred copper hammers were trying to planish my poor head. I could taste copper in my mouth. The world around me faded, losing color, as if trying to slip out of my control and dash off. Still, I held on. I did notice that my HP had plunged deep into the red, stopping at 12 pt.

“Had I not needed you, I would have killed you right there on the road. But I’m gonna prove to you that the Oracle was just a charlatan. Your blood will become the final drop in my potion.”

He lifted me by the scruff of the neck like a kitten and dragged me back to the wall where Arts was lying. He flung me onto the ground and bent low over me, so that I could smell his fetid breath.

“The Oracle said he couldn’t kill me. Said I was too strong for him. He said he was going to sacrifice himself. Because on the forty-seventh day after his death, a half-blood Korl would arrive. And here he is!”

He shook a finger at me, deadly serious, then dissolved into laughter and tousled my hair as if I were an old friend who’d just told him a funny joke. Then he grabbed me by the hair and brought his face close to mine.

“He was a charlatan,” he hissed, “And I’m gonna prove it once your blood joins all the others. A half-blood Korl, yeah right!”

He stepped a short distance away and cast a spell. Once again I saw the red intertwined threads reach out from a couple of people who were still alive — not toward the mage but to a *simulacrum* next to him which resembled a tall, naked muscle-bound man with a translucent crimson body.

“If one of these two moves, kill them,” Talsian ordered. “Did you hear that, half-Korl? If you as much as twitch, you’re dead. Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon. Your stupid attack deprived me of several fresh carcasses. I’ll have to go and get some new ones. The potion will be ready in a couple of days. That’s when I’m gonna need you.”

I was sitting close to Arts, afraid of even moving for fear of that translucent naked creature in front of me which was sporting a huge, er, potential. And Arts was just lying there, apparently without a care in the world. Now I not only had to get rid of our “guard” but also think of a way to defeat the crazy malefic. There was only one “but”: the most awesome imba toy in my arsenal had just proved to be completely useless. Which meant that I’d have to turn to the audience for help, a. k. a. to my more experienced lady friend.

“Arts! Arts!”

As if. And I couldn’t even shake her awake for fear of that giant thinking I was about to get up. What a shame I hadn’t studied water magic, otherwise I could have poured some water over her.

Never mind. I still had one rather useless spell. I held out my hand — which was the only small movement I could really make — and cast Light.

Your Illusions skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Illusions.

Mastery level: 1.

Now every fifth spell you cast won’t require any mana.

In all the thrillers I’d seen, stern interrogators would shine a light in the suspect’s face who would then cover their eyes and start blabbing away,

eventually confessing all their crimes (and any other deadly sins). I quite frankly laughed every time I saw this. But there must have been some truth in all those cheap police TV serials because Arts stirred and groaned.

“Don’t move,” I said.

“What’s going on-”

“Lie still, I tell you!”

I was lucky in that Arts was a smart cookie, even with a busted leg and concussion. She opened her eyes. Her tired gaze focused on me, then moved around the cave, finally alighting on the monstrous nude hulk.

“If you move, this naturist is gonna kill us,” I said.

“That remains to be seen!”

“Yeah right. You think you gonna kill him? You’ve already broken a leg, and now you’re gonna bust your head?”

“Who the hell is he?”

“A blood spirit,” I read the Insight message, “with a blood aura. No idea what it actually means, though.”

“What if you tell me everything right from the start? Who’s invited us to lunch? And why do you keep going on about blood?”

I told her everything from the moment I’d come round in every sordid detail. For some reason, she didn’t warm to Talsian, either, and even promised to rip his appendage off and stick it where the sun don’t shine. Basically, her behavior was less than ladylike.

Then it was my turn to listen.

“This mage may be loco, but he’s incredibly powerful. If your 5,000-HP ability couldn’t even make a hole in him, then I just don’t know. How long has he been leveling blood? Not that it’s relevant right now. What we need to do is smoke that transparent dude over there before his master arrives.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult. Can’t you just fire something at him? You might not even need your grenade launcher.”

“I could, only I don’t think it’s gonna work. There’s something you need to understand. Blood magic is still not well researched but from what we know, it can be very powerful. This brute could have well over a 1000 HT while the commoner he’s hooked up to is probably less than 20.”

“How does that work?”

“Magic! Blood magic. Apparently, any creature that levels it has the potential to go sky-high. It offers everything for that. It can raise one’s mana, health and vigor to such an extent that a train crash would feel like a hiccup. Just as it happened with your Talsian.”

“He’s no more mine than yours.”

“That’s irrelevant. And this blood spirit, as you call him, is feeding off two commoners at once, if I’m not mistaken. We can sing and dance all we want but we won’t be able to strip him of more than 30% HP, and we’ll die trying.”

“Just say there’s no way out.”

“There is, but you’re not gonna like it. A blood spirit sucks the life out of its host. If the host dies, so will the simulacrum.”

“Wait a sec! Did I understand you correctly?” my voice grew sterner. “Do you suggest we kill these people?”

“Exactly,” she replied in an even stronger tone. More than that: she looked me straight in the eye. She was the epitome of determination.

Which was more than I could say about myself.

“This really isn’t it right,” I finally said.

“What isn’t?”

“It’s not their fault. They don’t deserve any of this. They definitely don’t deserve being killed by us.”

“Do *we* deserve being killed? Do you suggest we give up and wait patiently for our own demise? Or should I say, our turn? Look me in the eye! Do we or don’t we?”

I didn’t say anything. I had nothing to tell her. Part of me had already agreed with her reasoning while the other half was screaming at me that I had no right to decide anybody’s fate. Unlike Jan or Pull, these people had done nothing to hurt me. Nodding my head would condemn them to death.

“If you’re so reluctant to tarnish your precious karma, oh Light One-” she began sarcastically.

“Shut up!”

Arts promptly did so, apparently realizing she’d gone a bit too far. She paused but she had no intention of giving up quite so quickly. “You can hate me all you want! You can despise me — but yes, I do want to live. And I’m quite prepared to kill a few Commoners if needs be. You know full well that I’m Dark. The time will come when you’ll realize that you can’t achieve true power without getting your hands dirty. You need to fight for your place under the sun.”

“What if I don’t want to achieve true power?”

“All right, all right,” she blew a desperate breath in an attempt to either calm herself down or find the right words that might convince me. “Let’s drop the emotion and think rationally. You’re in possession of two Divine Avatars. You’re undoubtedly one of the few Players most worthy of owning them. Nobody argues that. Now just imagine what’s gonna happen once Talsian lays his hands on one of the Avatars. Because he will, the moment he kills you.”

The five-minute silence that ensued felt like an eternity to me. You can’t imagine the kinds of thoughts that went through my head. But I’d already made up my mind. Arts had been right in one thing: A Seeker can’t let his emotions control his path. He has to be perfectly rational.

“You think you can kill them all at once?”

She didn’t bat an eyelid. “Yes.”

“Then you’d better do it. Not because I can’t or because I’m afraid of sullying my hands,” I forced myself to look her straight in the eye, investing all my strength into not averting my gaze. “If I do, it’ll be all for nothing.”

“I understand,” Arts replied. There was none of the usual sarcasm in her voice. Not a trace of fake obedience even. She really did understand. “May I?”

I nodded.

A staff appeared in her hand. She raised her other hand and moved it through the air as if feeling for something, then made a sharp movement as if pinning someone down.

The threads attached to the monster expired on one side.

The creature darted toward Arts but she'd already launched a fireball with her staff, illuminating the entire cave. The fireball zeroed in on its targets, exterminating the sources of blood magic. In other words, killing the two people. They died so that we could live. Or at least had had the chance to survive.

"That's it," Arts said softly, staring at the place where the blood spirit had just stood. "Now we need to get the hell out of here."

"You think you could conjure up a small stick and some string for me to make a splint for your leg?"

"Sure," she hurried to open her sketchbook and began leafing through it.

I glimpsed one of the pages with the already-finished grenade. Any other time I would have joked about it but now wasn't the right moment. Arts laid out a few sheets next to each other and sketched a small piece of wood. As for the string, she just pulled some out of her inventory.

"Ooh," she groaned when I pulled the string taut around her leg.

"Is this the third time I've saved you? I'm afraid, you'll have to save me from several enemies next time."

"That's not a problem," she said, clenching her teeth and digging her nails into the palms of her hands. Beads of sweat covered her forehead.

"You okay?" I asked as I let go of her.

"I'm fine. We need to get out of here. Once we've put down some distance from this place, you should leave me somewhere safe and go on to get the guards from Heraclea."

"Talsian might leg it when he realizes he's been found out. He may be crazy but he's not stupid. And what if he finds you? No, that's not a good

plan at all.”

“So what do you suggest, staying here? You think that’s a good plan? I’ve got a broken leg, don’t forget, and you seem to have run out of your little tricks.”

“You’re not quite right there. We need to stay and fight him. And incidentally, I’ve just got a few new tricks up my sleeve.”

I lowered my eyes, rereading the lines that had appeared in my mental view a few seconds prior.

You’ve helped a Player who is friendly with you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2000. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You’ve unlocked additional abilities of the Divine Avatar: Savior. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires 5000 pt. Light Karma.

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Chapter 22

ONE OF THE MOST challenging skills that not many people can learn but all are obliged to have is the ability to wait. It's always useful, whether you're a college student humbly waiting bouquet-in-hand for a tardy date, or an impatient police rookie stuck in a tobacco-filled unmarked car staking a suspect out. Not to mention an elderly pensioner waiting in line in the welfare department.

I had only just begun to master this complex skill but I was already sick to the back teeth of it. I mean, how long did it take to get to the nearest village and catch a couple of unsuspecting victims? Or just flag a car down and open it like a tin can?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not that bloodthirsty. I just knew that until a potential victim entered the cave, his or her life wasn't in danger. That would come later — and this "later" entirely depended on our quick reactions.

Arts took her old place next to the cave's wall. She was supposed to attract the bastard's attention. Then it would be my turn, attacking him from behind in the best traditions of BDSM movies. Especially because now I had my share of weapons to choose from. As soon as I'd helped Arts, my karma had hit 2000 pt., unlocking three more abilities. I wouldn't say all of them were equally useful but they were curious to say the least.

Shield of the Lamb

Creates a spherical holy shield all around you which ignores all magic attacks from any Dark-karma creature

Use: on self

Duration: 2 min

Cooldown: 7 days

Walking on Water

Allows you to move over a liquid surface

Use: on self.

Duration: 3 min

Cooldown: 24 hrs

Righteous Blow

Allows you to deal a triple crit by any means available.

Use: varies

Cooldown: 7 days

We'd even come up with some semblance of a plan, but that wretched Talsian still hadn't showed up. The fire under the pot should have gone out a long time ago but it hadn't even begun to die down. Magic, it was all done by magic here.

We'd liberated three of the surviving victims but they seemed to languish in a weird comatose state, a bit like flies when the spider injects them with his digestive enzymes. Apart from that, we hadn't found much of any interest. I inspected the cave, hoping to locate a stash or a secret hiding place but found nothing. I got the impression that the crazy malefic never parted with whatever treasures he might have.

After a couple of hours of waiting, I was beside myself with boredom. Arts was luckier: at least she had her sketchbook which she'd laid

out on the stone floor next to the everburning fire and was now busy doodling in it while I paced the entrance, listening intently over the sound of the surf outside. I even peeked out, only to discover that the cave mouth was located right by the water's edge. There was no point in keeping an eye on the surrounding area as the view from the cave was very limited and risked attracting attention to ourselves.

Finally, after three hours of waiting, I heard the sound of gravel tumbling down the slope. "There he is!"

Arts hurried to lean languidly against the wall. She winced as she dragged her wounded leg closer to her body and laid her hands in her lap, making it clear she was ready for the show. In the meantime, I froze about three paces away from the entrance with my back pressed against the wall.

"Sergei, don't forget what I said!"

"I won't."

"You need to strike the right spot and use just the right amount of strength."

"Quiet!" I hissed. The footsteps were very close now.

"Okay, okay."

Now it was my turn to act. My hands moved rather awkwardly as I cast the little-practiced spell. The Mantle hugged my shoulders like a cozy fur coat on a wintry morning, muffling all sounds and spreading a strange calm through my body.

The Shield of the Lamb was a surprise. I thought it would be just another sphere but it came as a bright flash which instantly expired, leaving me with a weird confidence that it had indeed worked as it was supposed to.

I slowly drew my Katzbalger and clenched it hard.

The blood mage staggered into the cave under the weight of four new victims. Despite his frail build, he was carrying two on his shoulders and dragging two more behind him. He must have brought them from afar because their limbs were covered in wounds and bleeding: clearly a waste from the malefic's point of view.

He noticed the absence of the blood spirit at once. He shrugged his load off by the entrance, lowered his head and came at Arts.

"I'm afraid, you're late," the girl smirked. Still, according to my Observation, she was pretty nervous.

"Where's the half-blood?" Talsian invested all his bloodthirstiness into the question. His words painted a gruesome scene in my mind. Him, slitting Arts' throat. Watching her blood flow. Skinning her alive. Gutting her, ripping all the veins from her body, slicing through her muscles and breaking her joints.

I shook my head free from the vision and softly tagged on behind him.

"Where's the half-blood?" he repeated.

"Gone to fetch the guards."

"Liar," Talsian said smugly.

I realized I wasn't gonna make it. The mage recoiled and swung round, so my sword barely touched his shoulder. All it did was draw a few drops of blood.

"Silly Seeker," the malefic grinned gleefully. He started waving his arms frantically in the air like a tecktonik-dancing epileptic caught in a strobe light, then stretched them out in front of him.

What happened next could probably be called Blood Rain. Or Red Tornado. Whatever. A powerful spray of reddish-brown droplets swept over me without causing me any damage. The holy Shield worked like a dream.

“How did you do that, Korl?” Talsian asked, not really scared, but I could see that my invulnerability was bothering him.

“A good magician doesn’t reveal his secrets to the audience,” I said, feigning indifference.

Which admittedly wasn’t easy. The mage conjured up a glowing rope and lassoed me with it — but the rope disintegrated the moment it had touched the Shield. Talsian then attacked me with two more spells: one of fire, the other of ice, following them up with my all-time fav, electricity.

By the time he’d realized that I was now immune to his magic, it was already too late. I took another swing with my Katzbalger. A short sword appeared in the mage’s hands, more like a longish dagger, really, lightweight and apparently perfectly balanced. Talsian pointed its wafer-thin predatory tip at me and lunged toward me, forcing me to stab him.

The Mantle disintegrated in a flurry of blue sparks as I buried the Katzbalger deep in his chest, slicing through a couple of ribs as it went. Dammit! Either I’d missed or Talsian had managed to dodge it at the last moment.

[∞]

This time, everything went according to our plan — or should I say, Arts’ plan because all I’d done was follow her advice. The Righteous Blow sliced right through his neck. No amount of power or hitpoints could set his head back on his shoulders now.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 15.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Observer. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained the Regeneration skill.

You've gained the Bloody Whip spell.

Your fame has increased to 7.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2020. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2040. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2060. You gravitate to the Light Side.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2080. You gravitate to the Light Side.

Talsian's sword clattered to the floor. The bonfire under the magic pot expired. The mage himself crumbled to dust which dissipated at my feet.

“I told you it would work!” Arts shouted. “Even if his Unarmored Combat was maxed out, all it could do was lower the damage. But a crit is a crit! Hello? Sergei?”

I stood there staring at the message. The offer of the Observer development branch was just too tempting. It meant thousands of points of mana, health and vigor. All I had to do was find an occupation of my choice.

It would all have been well and good — but it gave me no guarantee of escaping Talsian’s fate. Not that I could ever become a bloodsucker, but there were plenty of other stomach-turning activities in the world to choose from. This Talsian must have once been a perfectly normal guy too. True, one’s natural leaning did matter but...

But I quite liked myself the way I was now, thank you very much. Ditto for my current development branch. I swiped the message away. There were two more left, and they looked marginally more interesting.

Regeneration (Strength) — the ability to restore damaged tissue within a relatively short period of time. Your current level of Strength allows you to choose two of the ability’s available options offering improved regeneration of two of the following types of wounds: stabbed, slashed, cut, bruised, lacerated, gunshot and bite wounds.

That set me thinking. Slashed, cut, bruised and lacerated wounds could be dangerous but hardly life-threatening. Bite wounds — now they depended on the kinds of creatures they had here. Which left stab and gunshot wounds as the most logical choice. So that’s what I selected.

Bloody Whip (Destruction) — materializes a combat lash which deals 120 pt. damage with every blow while restoring 60 pt. to the caster’s health

Cost of use: 150 pt. mana. Duration: 20 sec.

Yeah right. I didn’t have enough mana to even test it. But I can’t tell you how badly I wanted to have it.

“Hey you, daydreamer,” said a voice at my feet.

I looked down and saw Arts who must have crawled toward me from her place by the wall. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“You zoned out, didn’t you? Someone had to wake you up. Help me to my feet, will you?”

I lifted her up lightly and set her onto her good leg. She looked around, hopped over to one of the rocks and slumped onto it. “Go take a look at what he dropped.”

I was actually already on my way to the little pile of ashes which kept shrinking despite the fact that there was no wind here to disperse them. I picked up Talsian’s sword but immediately snatched my hand back: the blade felt red-hot as if it had just left the swordsmith’s forge.

Arts frowned. “Whassup?”

“It’s hot!”

“Can I take a look?”

I scooped the sword up and lobbed it to her. She caught it in mid-flight with both hands and began studying it. After a while, she stopped and raised her head.

“When it rains, it pours,” she said. “This Talsian must have been a decent spell modifier. He charmed his sword all by himself.”

“What kind of magic is it, let me guess,” I said sarcastically, pressing my burned fingers to the lobe of my ear. “Aha! It’s blood magic! It has already put me off steak for a year.”

“Your insight knows no bounds,” she replied in kind. “Of course it’s blood magic plus his own Dark karma that also played a part. So for you Lighties this sword is sorta cursed.”

“Cursed?”

“Not in the true sense of the word, no. It’s just that you can’t use it. Just imagine it as an unruly adult dog and yourself as a newbie pet owner. The dog just won’t obey you.”

“I see. By taking it, I would be biting off more than I could chew.”

“Sort of.”

“You can have it if you want,” I said.

“I don’t think so! You’ve no idea what kind of magic might still be lurking within it. I really don’t want it to activate at the worst possible moment. It would be better to sell it,” her eyes lit up with the kind of greed Scrooge would have been proud of. “Eighty percent to you and twenty to me, for arranging it.”

“Okay, go ahead. I didn’t expect anything else from you, anyway. You really think there is demand for this sort of thing?”

“Sure. You don’t think that Talsian is the only blood mage around, do you? There must be Players prepared to pay hundreds of grams for a sword like this. It’s just a question of time.”

She promptly slid it into her inventory while I bent over the malefic’s ashes. I picked up 140 grams of dust and shoved it into my own bag, feeling no remorse for not sharing it with Arts. This was one simple truth that had already been hammered into me: if you kill a Player, everything he or she drops is your property. It’s nothing to do with greed or selfishness. It’s just the way it is.

Something glinted amid the ashes. Overcoming my nausea, I rummaged through the mage's remains and fished out a large well-worn brooch shaped like a butterfly. Just a piece of cheap costume jewelry, and an old one at that.

I took a better look at it. Its front wings were so dark they were almost black; its rear wings were yellow with two parallel dark lines.

I turned the brooch over and saw a pattern on the butterfly's chest shaped like a human skull. Talk about horrendous beauty. I shoved it into my inventory too.

"Now what?" Arts asked.

Her question had the effect of an electric shock because deep inside I divined the meaning she'd invested in it. There were only two options available to us. We could either split up so that I could go and fetch the guards while the girl kept an eye on any survivors.

Or we could just split, period.

I focused, searching my own heart for an answer which came surprisingly quickly: the kind of solution which would suit everyone involved.

"I'm gonna use my Map Making skill to set up a marker here," I said. "Once we get to Heraclea, we'll forward the information to the guards and leg it. I won't be able to save both you and all these people on my own. And it would be pointless leaving you here because you won't be able to help them, anyway. The sooner we get to the guards, the bigger their chances of survival."

You've taken the next step toward acquiring the Leadership ability.

Arts nodded and pointed at one of the new victims lying by the entrance. He was a skinny young lad in a pair of torn jeans and a light jacket. His cheekbone was caked in blood, his nose flattened to one side, obviously broken. Talsian hadn't worn kid gloves with his victims.

Still, there was something else about him, judging by the inscription hovering over his head:

???

Observer

"Well, what did you want?" I said. "That's exactly how one becomes a Player. You'd better give me your hand and let's get the hell out of here."

The climb up the rocky slope took us a while. Not because of Arts who seemed to be warming to her role as a one-legged pirate, hopping from one ledge to the next. It's just that the terrain was a real nightmare. It was a miracle how Talsian himself had never broken a leg here.

Once we'd climbed to a relatively level platform, I activated Map Making. The mist of war covering the area had now disappeared — probably because Talsian had already dragged us through here all the way to his lair. All we had to do was follow the light-colored trail back. After a mere fifteen minutes' trot, we found ourselves back on the road, at the exact same spot where the malefic had injured Arts and killed her snapdrake. We even saw the traces of blood still left on the tarmac. The snapdrake was gone.

"I wonder if my snapdrake is still hanging around here somewhere?" I wondered.

"Even if he is, you won't be able to catch him," Arts perched herself on the guard rail. "He has his own master, that fat guy from Heraclea. He

was the one who caught and tamed him, so that's where he'll go back to. We'd better hitch a ride."

I wish it were that simple! I stood on the roadside for a good twenty minutes before the first car drove past. "Past" being the operative word. Two more then flashed by, with the same result. And I'd tried everything, I tell you. I used my Disguise to try all kinds of appearances, from a young lad to a frail old man. But as Bumpkin would have said, I seemed to have chanced upon some particularly fussy Greeks. So I really had no other choice than to disguise myself as...

"Hi baby," the next driver said, lowering his window as he pulled up in his white Toyota. He was in his forties, his snow white teeth as brilliant against the backdrop of his bronze skin as two sticks of Wrigley's gum.

"Excuse me," I twitted. "I don't speak Greek. My friend and I are tourists. I'm afraid, she needs help. She's broken her leg. Maybe you could give us a lift to Hera- er, Iraklion?"

"I to speak little English. I help, sure. Put your friend in the back. You pretty one, you sit with me. In front."

I heaved a sigh. Or rather, the leggy blonde (that I now was courtesy of Disguise) sighed. I had no choice. I went and fetched Arts, helping her to hop back to the car. She climbed in the back while I had to sit next to the driver.

"Pretty lady," he tapped me approvingly on the shoulder. There was not a trace of fatherly good nature in his touch.

I must have been a Buddhist monk in my past life — oh what the hell, I could have been the Dalai Lama himself, because I didn't smash his skull in there and then, just calmly removed his hand with a frozen smile and turned away to the window.

Still, this aging Lothario had no intention of stopping. He introduced himself as Christophoros, told me a few things about himself in his broken English and didn't let up for the next hour.

That was the worst hour in my life. Everything else — like university lectures on the theory of relativity, the first days in my job as a loader and even family dinners — paled in comparison. He was by far the champion of boring. I tried to reply as politely as I possibly could while keeping an eye on the map. Where was that wretched Heraclea now?

Much to the driver's credit, he did bring us almost to the Community gate. In the end he asked me how long we were going to stay on the island, cadged my non-existent phone number off me and even gave me a peck on the cheek, so fast that I didn't get the time to react and beat his brains in. In actual fact, I was so taken aback I even forgot to rewind time. When the car finally pulled away, raising clouds of road dust, I didn't feel great at all.

"I didn't know you were so popular with men," Arts said, suppressing a smile.

"If you tell one living soul, I'll bust the other leg for you," I said under my breath.

She made a mouth-zipping gesture, then leaned heavily on me and hopped in front. "Let's hurry over to the guards. We'll tell them everything that's happened and get the hell out of here."

"I think it's gonna happen quicker than you think."

Indeed, one of those minions of the law was already walking past us. I waved, attracting his attention, and headed toward him. It took me all of five minutes to give him the whole story. The problem was, no one seemed to have any intention of letting us go. The masked guard went off to fetch several more who in turn brought even more to the scene. As I

narrated the events for the fifth time in a row, I felt like I was playing Chinese whispers.

By then, I'd already managed to materialize the map and forwarded them the cave's exact coordinates. That cost me another ten grams of dust but it couldn't be helped, I suppose. After an hour and a half, we finally received the message that all the victims had been rescued. Only then did they let us go, but not before they found out our exact destination and wished us a good journey under their ever-watchful stares.

The Pilot too wanted his pound of flesh: he caught up with us on the way back and demanded three hundred grams for the two snapdrakes. As it turned out, the second mount had never come back. I had no intention of arguing with him in front of the guards, especially seeing as we'd indeed failed to return them. I hated to part with the money but it couldn't be helped.

"I won't be going with you anywhere soon," I said to Arts as we approached the Gatehouse.

""All's well that ends well," she replied, still limping. A healer guard had cast a powerful spell on her leg and recommended that she use an ointment for a couple of days, so by now the girl could already walk unassisted, albeit a little bit unsteadily.

"I can't wait to get home," I said, entering the Gatehouse. "A nice hot bath, a cold beer and a bit of time to forget all this nonsense."

A squat shadow darted out of a corner of the room and blocked our way. Instinctively I cast Mantle and drew both my Katzbalger and the knife. Arts couldn't boast any Nordic sangfroid either, so she reached for her staff too.

"No weapons in the Gatehouse!" the Gatekeeper thundered.

We'd already realized that. Besides, I'd already taken a good look at the lad standing before us. He had huge bulging eyes, a sharp nose and a birthmark on his right cheek. My Insight didn't offer any information at all, apart from his Order affiliation: the boy was a Seer.

"Good day to you," the lad squeaked.

"Likewise," I said, frowning. "If you keep jumping out at people like that, you won't live to see your wedding day."

"Why my wedding day?" the lad appeared lost.

"Because," Arts played along. "What did you want?"

"His Firmness the Grand Master of the Order of Seers wishes to speak to you."

"Maybe some other time," I said, backing off from him. My last conversation with the Eternity Weaver hadn't been too constructive. "I wish to take a hot bath."

"He said he might have the answers to a few questions you most surely have," the lad fearfully blocked my way again. "Including whatever you'd like to know about the Oracle and the malefic."

"And am I supposed to tell him something in return?"

"Yes, but it concerns you as well. It's about the Horsemen."

"Which horsemen?"

"The ones the Oracle was talking about," Arts hissed to me. "The Sakis guy. Don't you remember what he said? About the Red, Black, Pale and White Horsemen?"

“The White one...” I repeated mechanically. I gave the lad a long look and nodded. “Very well. Where’s your Grand Master?”

Chapter 23

ACCORDING TO Mikhail Bulgakov's famous quote, you should never ask anyone for anything, especially not from those in a position of power. "*They will make the offer and they will give of their own accord*." Even though it was Satan who had uttered this phrase[9], it doesn't make it any less wise.

So that's why I chose to preserve an air of calm indifference. And as time later proved, it was the right tactic because judging by the Grand Master's nervous pacing of the room, he seemed to be more interested in our conversation than I was.

He wasn't in good shape. He appeared somewhat anxious, with sallow skin and dark rings around his eyes. I wouldn't exactly say he was ripe for the grave but he'd definitely lost his mojo.

"I'd like you to allow my friend to be present at our conversation.," I said, breaking the depressing silence.

"Are you sure you'd like to let her in on what I'm about to tell you?" the Grand Master asked.

"She'll find out about everything within half an hour, anyway. And I might need her advice."

"Very well. Oliverio!"

The Magister entered so quickly that it was clear he'd been eavesdropping behind the closed doors. Unlike his boss, he appeared completely unperturbed.

"I'd like you to bring the girl."

“It’s Arts,” I said.

The Grand Master smiled for the first time. “That’s not her real name. Women! They like making a mystery out of everything. Their age, their names, their families, their men...”

I didn’t get the chance to ask what he meant because the door opened, letting Arts in. The Grand Master motioned her to a fancy bow-legged soft chair. I was already sitting in a similar one.

Arts looked wary and comported herself appropriately, appearing calm and composed. It’s not every day that you get ushered into the residence of an ancient Order like this.

“Your Firmness, would you be so kind as to tell us everything right from the beginning, if it’s not too much trouble?” I asked.

“You don’t need to mention any titles,” the Grand Master replied.

“But I like to,” I said with a small smile. “I love the suggestiveness of it. I hope it wasn’t women who gave you this title?”

“Sergei!” Arts snapped. She turned to the Grand Master. “Were you telling him about the Horsemen?”

“Exactly,” the chief Seer gave the girl a long look as if weighing her up. “Have you heard about them?”

He sounded so cordial as if he’d known her his entire life. And strangely enough, his tone hadn’t raised any objections in any of us.

“Of course,” Arts shrugged. “It’s common knowledge. The four brothers who divvied up Cesspit between themselves. Morbian, Slayer, Austerius and Omega. There’re lots of rumors and legends circulating about them.”

“And some of them are true. Only they weren’t brothers. Morbian and Austerius were. Omega is actually a woman. But you’re right: they used to be the most powerful Players here. Or rather, their team was. The time of their rise to power is now called the Dark Ages. The memory of them is still so vivid that Commoners even call them...”

“The four horsemen of the Apocalypse!” it finally dawned on me. “Of course! Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death! Those who will usher in the second coming of Christ!”

“Sergei, Sergei. You’ve been reading too many fantasy books. Although it’s very likely that the arrival of the other three might deal our world a critical blow — but at the moment, it’s quite impossible.”

“At the moment?”

“As long as Morbian, the White Horseman, has the seal in his keeping.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Well.. sooner or later I might have to explain everything to you anyway. I’m not gonna tell you how the Horsemen had come about. It’s pretty pointless and in any case, what they did later is much more important. As I already said, they used to be pretty powerful as a team — but each one of them had an ego to match and wanted to become the sole ruler of this world, reigning over commoners as well as Players. That’s when they came up with the idea of a ‘Tourney’. Its rules were simple: each one of them received a particular nation and the first one who conquered half the world with it would be declared the winner. All the others would kneel down to him and obey him.”

“Let me guess,” I said, taking in what he’d just said. “Fifth or sixth century A.D., right?”

The Grand Master nodded. “The fifth, by the commoners calendar. Morbian with a small retinue of Players went to rule the Huns, Slayer the Visigoths, Austerius the Vandals and Omega the Celts. But it was Morbian, the White Horseman, who had the biggest success in guiding Etzel the Hun. He was closer to winning the Tourney that any of the others.”

“But Etzel — or Attila, right? — was killed by Omega, wasn’t he?” I said, remembering what the young Oracle had said.

The Grand Master nodded. “That’s what rumors claimed. That was the first grain of discord between them. After that, the Horsemen couldn’t trust each other any longer. Especially not Morbian. They shunned him. That’s when Seers first came about. We created a powerful spell and synced it with the seal. At the right moment, Morbian invited the other three Horsemen to an island where he put them to sleep.”

“He put them to sleep?”

“A lot of people call him Pestilence but that isn’t his development branch. He specializes in sleep and dreams.”

“Okay, so he put the others to sleep...”

“...and we shut them up in elemental sarcophagi: one of Water, one of Earth and the third one of Fire. Many of the Seers were willing to go much further but Morbian insisted that his brethren should live.”

“What exactly did you have to offer him?”

“Lots of things. Spells, potions, dust. But most importantly, Gramr.”

“You mean the sword that Hunter used to have in his keeping?”

“At the time, there was no such thing as a sword keeper. They turned up much later.”

“But if Hunter ended up with the sword, it means that Morbian didn’t get his reward, did he?”

“Let’s put it this way: neither of the two parties stuck to their word. For that reason, we kept the sword and Morbian kept the seal. Actually, over time we discovered that it wasn’t such a bad thing. It was in his own interests that his brethren didn’t escape. And we got to keep the mighty sword. We actually almost forgot about him. Last time we saw him was a few years ago in Arghan, the world on the underside of the Universe. And now he’s back!”

The Grand Master walked over to a side table with a few bottles, opened one, poured himself a glass and drank it in one swig. He didn’t even offer us any, the bastard.

“Thanks for clueing us in,” I said, looking at the bottle. Holy Jesus, now I couldn’t stop thinking about its contents. “But what’s it got to do with me, anyway?”

“Oliverio makes regular checks of every Player’s thread of life. Just so that we could stay safe.”

“And last time you did it, you saw something that wasn’t very good,” Arts offered.

He nodded. “Exactly. Every Seer saw different versions of the future but in every one of them, Morbian took me.”

“Took you?”

“That’s right. Not killed me but took me with him.”

“So what’s the problem, then? Tell the Magister to find out how he can be killed,” I said.

“In order to divine something like that, you need to really know the subject to be able to tune in to their mind. The better you can do that, the more accurate the information. But when we last saw Morbian, Oliverio wasn’t even born yet.”

“So what the hell am I here for?”

“Oliverio saw the conversation we’re having now. That’s why he tried to tune in to you. It didn’t go very well but he did see a few things. Like the battle with Morbian.”

His words sent shivers down my spine. “So who won it?”

“He couldn’t really tell. But whoever did, my life seems to depend upon it. And not just mine. If Morbian gets hold of either of the two Avatars you have in your possession, he’ll try to subjugate our world. There’s a strong likelihood that he might succeed. He’ll find himself new followers and start by killing off the Guards. And then...”

He fell silent, biting his lip, then turned back to the table and poured himself another drink.

“So what is it you want from me?”

“We want you to kill Morbian. You two are bound to meet, anyway-”

“We already have,” I interrupted him.

“Have you?”

“Just in passing. He’s got white hair, right? He also has this contemptuous glint in his eye which makes you feel like shit. He’s so haughty he looks like he’s got a poker stuck up his ass.”

“Sounds like him.”

“Arts and I were on our way to Paris. Or, whatcha call it...”

“Lutum,” Arts prompted.

“And we came across him as we flew there. You’d think it was pure coincidence but when we then came out of the cataco- er, just one place we’d been to, he was standing there watching. Then he just turned and left.”

“As far as I know, he too has Insight, just like you do. Considering his current Intellect levels, it should be much higher than yours. You’re lucky he didn’t attack you there and then. He probably hadn’t yet decided what to do about you. But now he knows who you are. And you know now why he’s going to come to me.”

I nodded. “In order to find me. How much time have we got?”

“Not much. A couple of days, give or take. Our visions are never too accurate.”

I scratched the nape of my neck. It didn’t look good. Currently, I had only two of my Avatar abilities available: Transformation of Liquids and Walking on Water. You couldn’t call them combat skills by any stretch of imagination. And this so-called Horseman of the Apocalypse was already on his way to see me.

“In the Magister’s vision, was I alone or with friends?”

“Let’s put it this way, it was the same team as you have now,” he gave Arts a long look.

I frowned. “No Hunter? No Traug, nor Litius? What would that mean? How are we even supposed to prepare for this battle?”

“I don’t know. I simply considered it my duty to warn you.”

“And you? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take my wards somewhere safe so that none of them suffer from this. The Seers have already lost too many members as it is. Then I’ll just wait for Morbian.”

“And if he kills you?”

The Grand Master froze. Then he turned away and refilled his glass. He stepped back from the table, swished the amber liquid around his glass and downed it. A bitter smile spread across his face. “Do you know what happened to the old Oracle?”

“Talsian killed him.”

“And how old was he?”

I shrugged.

“Ancient,” the Grand Master said. “At one point I even thought that he’d offered himself up. Like, he was tired of life. But not really, no. He really couldn’t kill the blood mage.”

“But he did know Talsian was going to come for him. He could have avoided death.”

“He could have,” the Grand Master agreed. “Oliverio’s development branch is similar to his — if you omit the fact that the Oracle was a hundred times stronger. He can track the potential life scenarios of hundreds and thousands of people. Or he could, rather.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“I think he tried to provoke Talsian. He did tell him the truth that he’d be killed by a half-blood Korl. And because of that, Talsian stayed put, waiting for you to arrive. Had the Oracle escaped, Talsian might have fled

too. He would have laid low, performing his blood rituals — and who knows how many more victims would that have entailed? You know what I mean?”

“The Oracle sacrificed himself in order to stop Talsian.”

“That’s just one of my hunches. Who knows what really happened between them? All I know is that being responsible for people’s lives always implies the ability to sacrifice oneself, regardless of who you are: a parent, a lover or just a sympathetic passerby whose heart is full of Light. Which is why I’m quite prepared to die knowing that my team of Seers is safe. Know what I mean?”

I nodded even though, in my mind’s eye, not all the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle were in their right places. He must have had a point. I could understand the desire of a father or mother to sacrifice their own lives so that their child survived. It made perfect sense for me. But the fact that the Oracle had allowed himself to be killed just to save the lives of simple commoners... he hadn’t even known them! Just in order to stop Talsian and prevent him from committing more crimes?

Never mind. All this was just pure speculation on my part.

I chuckled. So that’s what the Oracle had been up to, as well as Oliverio and lots of lesser Seers. They were trying to second-guess their enemy, attempting to divine one particular scenario which would have a higher probability than all the others.

Was that what the Oracle had really counted on? Had he really placed himself on the chess board with all the pawns just so that we could win the game? I really didn’t know.

“We’ll be off, then,” I said unexpectedly for myself, getting to my feet.

“I hope you can use what you’ve just heard.”

“I hope so too. Honestly, I still don’t know what to do with all this information. Not the slightest idea.”

To my surprise, he walked over to me and shook my hand. He only spared a curt nod to Arts, then headed straight back to his bottle.

That’s how real men do it, I thought sarcastically. When the whole world goes to the dogs and you just don’t know what the hell to do, it’s time to get sloshed.

“Oliverio will show you out,” he said without turning back to us.

He hadn’t needed to mention it. The Magister had already opened the door as if he’d been eavesdropping the whole time (he might have been, in actual fact) and motioned us to follow him. I still liked Oliverio more than any of this bunch of empaths, soothsayers and other imba Seekers. He knew better than to stick his nose into our business. Even now, he just asked non-committally,

“How long are you staying in Prague?”

I smiled. He used the city’s commoner name, not the game’s appellation. Either he understood that for me it was easier this way, or the name of Prague meant more to him than Porog.

“Until they kick me out,” I joked.

“Why, you won’t even stop for a beer?” he grinned. “I highly recommend their Budvar half and half. They serve it in the Syndicate. If you don’t try it, you’ll be kicking yourself for the rest of your life.”

“For the rest of my short life, whatever’s left of it.”

I must have spoiled the moment like a lover of beans spoils the air in a crowded elevator. The rest of our journey through the posh mansion

was spent in silence. Arts looked completely zoned out as if she was searching for something in her interface. Then again, she could just have been pensive.

“Good luck,” the Magister said in all seriousness. His earlier cheerfulness was completely gone.

I shook his hand. “Same to you.”

“Home?” Arts asked as soon as the door closed behind us. “My leg is giving me hell. We need to buy some ointment.”

“You’re talking like an old woman. Oliverio has a point. We need to at least try some of the local brew. When are we ever gonna be in Czechia again? I could close my harpy quest while we’re at it. Or take a stroll around the community and see how the other half live.”

Arts didn’t argue. Either she too was curious, or she’d simply given up. I opened the map, located the place where we’d left the Gates and set up a marker. Now we could safely go anywhere without being afraid of getting lost in the meandering maze of crooked medieval streets.

I did like Prague, I have to admit. All the little houses with stern Gothic roofs straight off a postcard; an impossibly high distant spire of what must have been a major cathedral; crowds of gawking tourists. The whole place was so clean and well-tended you were literally afraid of touching anything.

We took a nameless old bridge across an equally nameless lazy river and started wending our way past three- and four-story houses. For some reason, it made me a little sad — simply because this picture-perfect luster was everywhere, in every one of the inner courtyards. Not for one moment did Prague lose its magical charm. Not a single crumbling house in sight; no dilapidated roofs or listing back doors the moment you turned off the main thoroughfare.

In one such little courtyard we found the entrance to the local Community. I could describe it as being somewhere between the one in our city and that of Paris. It was a cluster of several houses, one of which offered all kinds of services throughout its four stories. The Syndicate was located in a squat building which stood apart from the rest. Arts didn’t mention what was in the other ones.

The Syndicate itself was almost the same as ours. A bar took up all of the first floor. The mission boards were upstairs on the second floor although even there you could still see an occasional Player nursing a beer mug. But as far as I could work out, they still had to go back downstairs in order to get a refill. Next to the mission board was a desk where you could redeem a mission.

I ordered a beer. Not only did the bartender pour it immediately but according to him, it was beyond compare. The only thing I understood from his soliloquy was that their Budvar half-and-half was made with the best Žatec hops and Moravian malt. No idea whether it was supposed to be a good thing but the beer was indeed excellent. Once again it made me feel sad. Whenever was I going to taste it again in my hometown? I could, of course, come here every time I fancied downing a good brew but it would work out rather expensive in the long run.

Arts hadn’t ordered anything. Without saying a word, she hobbled upstairs with me and pointed at one of the small tables next to the mission board. I sat down, enjoying my beer while casting an occasional glance at the missions posted.

Rabid Gargoyle

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: attacking commoners

Sentence: death

Proof of completion: tail

Location: Prague, city center

Reward: 150 grams

Missing Snapdrakes

Mission from the Order of Drivers

Required: locate five snapdrakes gone astray

Location: Midland Russia

Reward: 300 grams

Salamanders

Mission from the Order of Alchemists

Required: catch 3 salamanders

Location: Purgator Wastelands

Reward: 800 grams

Fluorite Infestation

Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: manifesting themselves to commoners, encouraging unwanted superstitions and rumors of their supernatural origin.

Sentence: reduce the fluorite population at least by half

Proof of completion: wings

Location: the outskirts of the city of Nizhny Novgorod

Reward: 200 grams

There were also a few other interesting missions but it was this latter which caught my eye. It's not every day you chance upon a mission in your own town. Also, the sheet of paper was virtually snow-white. Apparently, no other Player had wanted to get involved.

But me, I was going for it.

"Don't," Arts said over her shoulder. "It's not worth it. If they say it's an infestation, there must be hundreds of them there. Also, they're especially strong during their mating season. You'll have to dose the whole lot in fire. It'll cost too much for the small return that it'll give you. Really not worth it."

I shrugged and pulled the paper off the board. "There's no harm in checking it out. What a shame we hadn't accepted the mission to kill Talsian! The reward was great — was it two kilos? Unfortunately, it was all a ripoff."

"What makes you say so?"

"They wanted his head as proof, didn't they? And how are you supposed to obtain the head of a dead Player if his body crumbles to dust?"

She nodded. Then her eyes opened wide in the kind of look one gives to a doctor who says he's gonna give you a three-gallon enema instead of a regular one. Only that her surprise was of a slightly different nature.

"You know what?" she said. "I think I know how we can close this mission."

Chapter 24

YOU CAN MAKE MONEY on practically everything without actually breaking the law. Bookies and casino dealers are my witnesses. The problem is, not everybody has this kind of commercial acumen. In my case, it was virtually absent due to two things: my parents' altruistic influence and a relatively comfortable childhood. But Arts, she absolutely shone in the money-making field.

She started by cadging Talsian's butterfly brooch off me, after which she made herself scarce and started talking to all the other Players, approaching them one by one until finally she spoke to an Abbas with a *Biolocator* tag hovering over his head. She spent a long time talking to him, even showing him the brooch a couple of times. Finally, the Abbas took the item and headed for the desk while Arts came back over to me.

"What kind of pointless altruism is that? You don't want to give him my boots as well?"

"I didn't give him anything," she said, even though she didn't take her eyes off the Abbas. "He's gonna help us get our money for killing Talsian."

"Okay. Now tell me all about your devious plan."

"It's very simple, really. We can't take the mission now because our mutual friend Talsian," Arts made the sign of air quotes, "is already dead. But there're other Players who still have it hanging around in their interface."

"You mean they can close it for us."

“Exactly,” she reached for my beer, took a swig and raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Not too bad!”

I took my mug away from her. “Go and buy your own, if it’s not so bad. You seem to have forgotten a very small detail. Whoever closes the mission will have to provide Talsian’s head as proof. Which they can’t do because his head is now busy pushing up daisies in the cave.”

“The mission doesn’t say anything about whose head it has to be. That’s what I’ve just read in Zurbus’ interface. Just a head.”

“Your explanation doesn’t make it any clearer, I’m afraid.”

“What’s the name of the butterfly on the brooch?”

“How the hell should I know? A butterfly is a butterfly. Could be a Cabbage White, for all I know.”

“What the hell, Sergei? Didn’t you see what it had on its chest? The skull, I mean?”

“Sure I saw it.”

“Its name is Death’s Head. Got it now? A Death’s *Head*. The brooch must have been very important for Talsian. He probably never parted with it, seeing as it can be used as proof of his death.”

“That’s provided...” I finished my beer with gusto and wanted to order another one but reconsidered. The second drink is never as good as the first one. “... provided your assumptions are correct.”

“They are,” Arts gave me a dig with her elbow, pointing at the desk.

Unlike in our Community, the local payout desk didn’t have its own office. Which was a bit inconsiderate, of course. I remembered a scene I’d witnessed in our local bank when the teller hollered across the room to her

colleague, “Can you get me two million in cash[10]? I need to pay out this guy!” Her customer emerged from her cubicle ten minutes later, his face red with angst, with probably only one thought in his head: how to get back home in one piece.

But now this same fact was playing into my hands as I watched this Zurbus guy surrender the brooch, impale the mission paper on the spike and collect his payment. A lot of it. He received so much dust that it took him a long time to brush it off the desk into his inventory. Not a single speck of it landed on the floor, all of it disappearing into his capacious bag. Finally, he was finished and came toward us.

“One kilo two hundred grams,” he slammed the bag down onto the table.

Arts tensed. “Our agreement was for one and a half kilos.”

“It was my honor at stake here too, you know.”

“Talsian also had something at stake here. Namely, his stupid head,” I said softly, watching the black growth on top of his head twitch like ears of wheat in the wind. “Did I make myself clear?”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 13.

Was it my imagination or had he turned pale? As far as a dark-skinned Abbas could turn pale, of course. He immediately added the missing quantity, gave us a light bow and hurried over toward the exit.

“And I thought that Abbases couldn’t lie,” I said, watching our failed conman leave.

Arts smiled. “They can detect lies, so they can’t lie around their own kind. In their own world, levels of corruption and criminality are very low. But the moment they find themselves in the company of other species... now that’s different.”

“I see. They’re so smothered by their own laws that they use every opportunity to go rogue.”

“Yeah, sort of. Slimy individuals,” she impatiently eyed the heap of dust on our table, then looked expectantly at me. According to our earlier agreement, she was to receive a third part of any proceeds, so now she was waiting for my permission.

“Five hundred grams of it is yours, as we agreed,” I said.

She deftly brushed her part off the table. I watched it disappear into thin air, then unhurriedly collected the kilo that was due to me. Strangely enough, such a heap of money didn’t stir anything in me now.

Still, I wasn’t in a hurry to leave. “Arts, what the hell do you need so much money for?”

Her face immediately turned blank. Smiling only a moment ago, now her expression was as sour as a rapper’s at a classical music venue. “It’s for a good cause.”

“Okay. How much do you need to raise?”

“A lot.”

“There’s no such number. Could you be a little more precise?”

“Twenty kilos.”

I whistled softly, then tried to convert the amount into Russian rubles and whistled again. For the likes of me, the amount was astronomical. “Are you in trouble?”

“No... I don’t know. In any case, it’s too late. If I don’t raise it, someone’s gonna die. I can’t let it happen.”

“Why didn’t you come and tell us about it before, when we had all that money in front of us? I’m sure we could have clubbed together for you.”

She frowned. “I just can’t work you out sometimes. Are you really so naïve or it is just a show? Here, everybody wants to hog the covers. That’s the law of the jungle. It might not be so apparent among humans — but don’t forget that Players travel between worlds, risking their lives on a daily basis and there’re infinitely fewer of us than Commoners to begin with, so among us it’s particularly obvious. Don’t get me wrong, Sergei, I really appreciate the thought but I’m more than sure that both Litius and Traug would have told me to get lost.”

She blabbered everything out in one go and fell silent. Her cheeks had turned crimson; there was a feverish glint in her eye. She might have been right. It was indeed a dog-eat-dog world — or should I say, Player-kill-Player?

But there was an exception to every rule. “How much do you still have to raise?”

She paused, thinking. “About four kilos.”

“It’s three now. Don’t bother to argue. You can pay it back when you can.”

“Thanks,” her face turned even redder, acquiring the shade of a lobster.

“That’s okay. Let me just close my harpy quest, and we’ll be on our way.”

The rest happened without any further ado. I handed in the mission paper to the Mechanoid assistant (who happened to be more human and less

robotic than you'd normally expect). He took it, paid me my honestly earned two hundred grams and closed the mission.

"Let's go," I said to Arts and walked down the stairs.

I felt like shit, for some reason. You'd think the day had been a hoot, wouldn't you? I'd helped the Oracle out, saved God knows how many people from the crazy blood mage, and even managed to get a reward for smoking him. And still I had a very bad feeling about all this. One of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse was going to come and get me, for crissakes! Not even me, actually, but my two Divine Avatars. And what did I have to offer against him?

"Arts, think you could draw me a tank in the next couple of days?"

She chuckled. "I could draw you a zipper to zip your greedy mouth."

"That's what I thought."

The Prague air smelled of detergent with just a hint of malt — a clean, sweetish smell. I'd have loved to spend some more time here. It would be so nice to take a stroll around the Old City, drinking beer and eating waffles. But in that case, Morbian would arrive here too. And then all hell would break loose...

The journey home cost us thirteen grams. Each of us paid their own fare. I did a bit of mental math: the pleasure of having a good beer averaged just over $300 for a return trip. On one hand, it was a bit like taking a Concorde to the next-door bakery but on the other, why not if you could afford it?

Still, at the moment it was pretty academic. I had more important things to consider than my next beer order.

"I'll call you about the spear," Arts said as we parted.

“Which spear?”

“The one you got off that Kabirid. You gave it to me yourself, remember?”

“Ah, that. Yeah, sure. Call me any time.”

I checked my phone. Still nothing from Julia. I shrugged and dialed a cab. I really didn’t feel like roughing it on the bus with the rest of humanity today. If someone trod on my foot, I might accidentally burn them alive.

I got home in no time. Then again, I might have been too deep in thought. I paid and got off.

“Hey man, did you see a young guy around here, a real skinny one?”

I turned toward the already-familiar goon. He really shouldn’t have crossed me today. Wrong place, bad timing.

I waited for the cab to pull off and leave, then looked around the courtyard which was deserted, apart from a woman opening a front door. In a few bounds, I was upon my enemy. He was alone, just for a change: either his buddies were fed up with such a placid pastime, or they might have been busy pestering someone else. In any case, it suited me fine.

His eyes opened wide. “You?!”

“That’s right,” I replied in a strange voice which wasn’t really mine. The sound of it reminded me of someone I couldn’t quite place.

He tried to punch me but I dodged the blow. His fist glanced off my shoulder.

But even that was too much. This slimebag should learn his lesson!

[∞]

I crouched, dodging his blow, then stood up like an uncoiling spring, grabbing the hood's throat and lifting him in the air. The old me would have never been able to do that even if he'd used both his hands — but the half-Korl that I now was felt only a pleasant tingling in his muscles.

The goon's tiny fingers sank into my hand. "Get off me, you sonovabitch! I'll kill you!" His legs dangled in a most peculiar way. With every passing second, the torrent of cussing grew thinner as his breathing grew slower, bordering on wheezing.

"I'm only gonna say this once," I lowered my hand slightly so that our eyes were at the same level.

My other hand felt the knife in its grip. For a brief while, my enemy's throes became more energetic.

"If I even see you anywhere again — whether in this neighborhood or anywhere else in town — this knife will put a nice big smile on your face, ear to ear. Do I make myself clear?"

"P-please... let me go, please..."

"I can't hear you! Do I make myself clear?"

I brought the knife to his shoddily shaven neck, just for an extra bit of encouragement, and pressed it to the skin, watching a drop of blood form under the blade.

"Yes! Yes, you do!"

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 14.

It took me some time to realize what happened next. A thin trickle ran from under the goon’s pant leg, wetting his boot and dripping to the snow which turned yellow and porous. I’d seen similar scenes in action movies, so I sort of knew that some human organs can relax in response to mortal danger, but I’d always believed it to be artistic license. But this...

My hand slackened. The hooligan dropped to his backside. He didn’t run: whimpering like a seven-year-old, he hurried to crawl aside. Only when he’d put a good ten feet between us, did he clamber back to his feet and staggered away, stooping and wailing like some crazy version of the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

I just stood there, staring at the wet trail left in his wake. The little yellow puddle next to me had already begun to freeze solid.

I was next to tears.

The voice. The strange voice I’d used. Now I remembered who it reminded me of. That’s exactly how Janus used to speak — the contemptuous, disdainful creature relishing in his own power.

That was the voice of the Destroyer God!

A spasm doubled me up, running through my body and exploding in my stomach. I puked all over the snowy driveway and my own boots. Staggering like a drunk, I backed off and headed home. Whoever saw me at that particular moment must have indeed thought I was drunk.

“Master! I woke up and you weren’t there!” the sobered-up Bumpkin greeted me. “My mouth tastes like a cat’s litter box. But that’s not even... Master? Master, whassup?”

He froze, then hurried to help me take my sodden boots off. “What’s all this? Master?”

“That’s just beer and some bile,” I said, feeling shivery as if I’d just spent a few hours in the subzero cold. “The beer was excellent, by the way. No comparison to the piss I normally buy. I’m sure you’d have approved of it.”

“But what’s wrong with *you*? You look like you’ve seen a ghost! Your face...”

“I’ve got no face, my friend. I’ve lost it. I’ve lost my face.”

I headed for the bathroom, peeling off my clothes on the way. I turned on the faucets and climbed into the tub without waiting for it to fill up. I was shaking harder with every passing moment: it felt like I’d been seized by the mother of all cramps.

Just as I thought I was about to pass out, the spasm began to release me. It took a while, so I didn’t even notice it subside: like a bitterly crying child whose sobs eventually begin to abate until she’s so tired of crying she quietens down and stops altogether. I now lay motionless in the hot bathtub, feeling completely drained by today’s events.

“Master, what do you prefer? A sweet pie or a meat one?”

“It’s up to you.”

“Got it. I’ll make both. You stay there. It won’t take long.”

I stayed there for a while until the water started to feel cold, then climbed out. Now that I’d got it out of my system, I felt a bit better. I toweled myself down and went to my room.

The whole apartment smelled of fresh pies. Bumpkin was quick, wasn’t he? I slumped onto the couch, switched the TV on and stared mindlessly at another poor excuse for a comedy show. It took me a good five minutes to realize that instead of watching the program, I was mechanically turning the knife in my hands.

What the hell? I hadn’t even noticed myself taking it out of my inventory.

As I put it back, I noticed the whistle which Traug had so shamelessly pilfered from Jumping Jack. I’d forgotten all about it. I studied it a little, then brought it to my lips and blew it.

It must have given off some sort of ultrasound, the kind they use to keep dogs at bay. In any case, I heard virtually nothing.

What I did hear was a popping sound as a very anxious Bumpkin materialized in front of me. He jumped up to grab me by the shoulder and forced me down onto the floor.

“Keep quiet, Master, for Christ’s sake!”

I was about to ask him whether he indeed believed in Christ or he just said it as a figure of speech. But just as I opened my mouth, something banged against the window pane, a bit like a hail stone. And another. And a whole torrent of hailstone noises: Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Who on earth could have given you this evil toy?” Bumpkin mouthed.

“Whoever it was, he’s not having it back,” I replied even softer, even though there was no need to lower our voices in all that racket. “What’s that over there?”

“Just the most useless and mischievous of all living creatures,” Bumpkin replied, investing all his anger into the phrase.

Now my curiosity was so piqued that I couldn’t help it any longer. Carefully I raised my head and a ventured a peek out of the window.

At first I was blinded. It looked like some crazy Santa had wound our window pane with Christmas lights and turned them all on. Then I realized that it was in fact a multitude of fluorites. How many of them were there?

I gulped and turned back to the goblin. “Bumpkin, please don’t tell me they’re gonna stay there for good. Some old lady might look out of her window and demand my eviction telling everyone I experiment with radioactive substances or something. The Community guards too, you know. If they find out about this, they won’t be very happy.”

My recent apathy was now gone, replaced by panic. The easiest way to curb a bout of depression is apparently by giving the sufferer an urgent task to solve. The problem was, my task-solving facilities refused to cooperate.

“Nah. It’s all right. In the village, you might have had problems. They’re so stupid and useless they’re no good for anything,” Bumpkin pondered from his languid cross-legged position on the floor, propping himself on one elbow and scratching his beard. He was the picture of Socrates if ever I’d seen one!

“Some folk might catch one and use it as a house lamp, but God forbid you let a whole swarm in.” he continued. “But that’s in the village,” he raised a meaningful finger. “It’s nice and quiet there. And this is a big city.”

“So what?”

“It’s so noisy! Something’s constantly rattling, clanging and screeching. And those little critters hate noise more than anything else in the world.”

As if in confirmation, I heard the wailing of an alarm outside. The rustling of the little wings stopped. I took a cautious look outside. Bumpkin

had been right: the little fluorites were hurrying to leave my window pane and head elsewhere. In only a few seconds, they were all gone.

“They don’t normally live in cities,” Bumpkin said, climbing back to his feet. “They prefer woods and rivers.”

“Makes sense,” I said, pulling out my phone and checking the map. I tried to zoom it out but still couldn’t see much at all, so I switched on my laptop, opened the browser and zoomed out again.

That’s right. This was the place. My house was located right next to the Koposovo Oakwood nature reserve. Further on lay a couple of large lakes, followed by the majestic Volga River. Perfect breeding grounds for fluorites. That’s why they were so numerous here.

This was the answer to the question where exactly to look for the fluorite infestation. How to get rid of them was another problem entirely. Having said that...

I smiled at a new idea, original and quite funny. Should I do it?

I studied the map some more, seeking for spots which might suit my purposes, then singled out the one that looked the most interesting. It was far from the dormitory suburbs, right next to the heat exchange equipment factory.

I grinned, utterly pleased with myself. I stood up and had a good stretch. “So Bumpkin, what happened to your pies? I’m absolutely starving!”

Chapter 25

AS THE SAYING GOES, you need to sleep on it. A corny phrase which is normally employed in any situation, whether it really applies or not. The problem is, everybody sneers at it but nobody ever does it. Like, it's an age-old wisdom, so what? But it really is. All you need to do is leave your problem well alone, go to bed and think about it the next morning when you'll see it in a totally different light.

In a nutshell, I woke up a new man. Or rather, yesterday afternoon I had changed already, becoming someone different from who I used to be. And now I'd changed again. And schizophrenia had nothing to do with it. This was only a game reality burdened with all the problems I still had to solve, most of which involved two powerful Divine Avatars. To tell you the truth, I dreaded to think what was going to happen next.

Still, at the moment things weren't so bad. I had a plan; my phone was absolutely bursting with Julia's messages; and my apartment was awash with the aroma of Bumpkin's cottage cheese patties. On my way to the bathroom, I noticed that he'd even sprinkled them with something that looked like vanilla sugar. Wherever had he procured it from? I'd never had it in my miserable excuse for a pantry.

"Master? We seem to be running low on vittles."

I rinsed my mouth from toothpaste. "You mean, groceries?"

"That's right. I've already made a tiny little list."

I chuckled. A list! Probably a scrap of old parchment covered in his scribbles.

As it turned out, I wasn't that far wrong. His "tiny little list" had a good hundred entries, if not more, which he'd jotted down on a scrap of the old wallpaper left after his redecoration exploits. He handed it to me with all due ceremony.

"Er, Bumpkin," I said as I skimmed through it. "Where, pray tell, am I supposed to get you "*a fine young boar*" or a "*catfish of no more than twenty pounds*"?

The goblin shrugged. "That should be enough for us! It's not as if we're expecting company."

I continued reading. *"Five pounds of the best Beluga caviar; a sack of barley flour; two loaves of pandemain bread; a jug of Jersey clotted cream; a small sturgeon; a chicken stuffed with crayfish...* Please don't get me wrong, it's not as if I can't afford it... But where am I supposed to get it all?"

"At street vendors! Any food peddler should have it."

"Okay. I might get some of it at the farmers' market, I suppose. Then again, how about caviar and a young boar? Where am I supposed to get *that* for you?"

Bumpkin's eyes became the size of the Shrek cat's. What would you do with him?

"Never mind," I said. "I'll check the market, anyway."

"And there's another thing, Master. This is what I found while I was cleaning out the closet," he handed me a thick battered dog-eared notebook.

I opened it. My heart beat faster. This was my old Grandma's handwriting, so familiar and so dear.

I turned a page.

Stuffed cabbages

2 heads of crunchy white cabbage, 2 pounds of ground beef, a cup of rice, three carrots, two small onions, tomato paste, salt and pepper.

I turned the page.

Honey pie

Flour, 2 cups. Vanilla sugar...

I paused, staring at the pages covered in her large legible handwriting. A recipe book! Even my mother didn't have one anymore. The Internet had made them redundant. These days, there were tons of recipes on any cooking site, to suit any taste and wallet. But nothing like this.

I closed the notebook and heaved a sigh.

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 1.

What was that now? Did this new skill have any connection with the notebook? It might do. I may have to borrow a couple of books off Litius and see what happens.

"Do you want me to dump it in the trash?" Bumpkin asked, trying to retrieve the notebook from me. "There're two recipes there that aren't right."

"Don't you dare! It's a memento from my Grandma."

I stashed the notebook in my inventory, got my phone and scrolled through Julia's texts. In a nutshell, all she said was, *"I'm on my way home, there was no signal, I'm missing you."* I wrote her a long and rather soppy epistle, thinking that if I'd ever seen something like it on somebody else's phone, I'd have ridiculed them mercilessly.

There was also a text from my Mom, reminding me of tonight's dinner. Yeah, right. How could I ever forget.

I dialed Arts but she was out of range. Which meant that she was in the Community, most likely. And that's where I should be heading as soon as I finished my daily practice. This was going to be one hell of a day, I could see that.

Hunter was already waiting for me in the foundation pit, one of his feet leaning on a small hillock. He nodded, activated the Repelling Stone and stood opposite it.

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood…

The moment I accepted, he lunged at me, whipping a long fat cane out of thin air. What a weird weapon.

As soon as I thought about it, I sensed a burning pain in my arm. I rolled back, rubbing the bruise. Judging by the fact that the fight was still on, Hunter hadn't drawn any blood. A bruise, so what! I could live with that.

"You went to see the Oracle."

"How do you-"

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 8.

His next lunge got me in the leg. I screamed. What did he think he was doing? This way I'd be black and blue all over by the time this was finished.

[∞]

“You went to see the Oracle.”

I jumped to the side and counterattacked with my Katzbalger but missed. Despite my best efforts, I received another whack from his cane.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 8.

“Shit!” I let slip without actually intending to cuss.

“That’s not an answer,” he said, giving me another taste of his cane.

End of combat.

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood…

Yeah right. Can’t wait. “How about telling me why you’re so angry about it?”

“You could have told me where you were going.”

Without even realizing it, I was already back on my feet directly opposite him, staring him out. “Am I supposed to tell you whenever I go somewhere?”

“You’ve no idea of the value of your life,” he said grimly.

“Okay! How about telling me what makes it so valuable, then? What’s so important about it? Why did the Chorul have to sacrifice his own life just so that I could become a Player? Come on, out with it! Everybody else seems to know! I’m the only one who’s wandering about in the dark like a blind kitten in search of his mother’s titties!”

My pent-up resentment had finally found itself a release valve. I spouted the words without pausing to think what they meant, my brain barely capable of processing them. I only stopped when I’d spat out

everything I had to say, knowing full well I'd said some things I was going to regret.

"You'll find out soon enough. Very soon. Our training session's over for today."

He left dramatically, his shadow flitting away across the expanse of snow.

I was a real asshole, wasn't I? Why did I have to scream at him like that? It was pretty clear that he knew something that I didn't. He had all the cards in his hand so he knew what to do next.

Then again, his idea of what to do next could be diametrically opposed to my own. In which case, what was I supposed to do?

One thing I did realize was that when Morbian came, Hunter wasn't going to be around. I simply wouldn't tell him. Firstly, because it really wasn't his war. And secondly, because I still couldn't forget the Oracle's curse. The old Oracle, I mean, the real one. And I'd no wish to be responsible for Hunter's death.

In that case, there was only one option: find out what was going to happen to Traug and Litius. Admittedly, their absence in Oliverio's visions worried me quite a bit. My name had been associated with death a bit too often just lately. I had to find them and try to do everything to keep them out of harm's way. I might send them to Purgator or maybe even to Traug's homeland. Let them sit there for a couple of days until it all blew over.

I climbed out of the foundation pit and dialed a cab, telling them to pick me up at the supermarket. While I was waiting, I took a better look at the welt on my arm. This was going to be the mother of all bruises. To make things worse, my every movement hurt like hell. Never mind. I'd have to soldier on until Bumpkin could heal it in the evening.

A battered old Opel pulled up nearby. I jumped in, buckled up and repeated the address to the cabbie. Some taxi drivers had this remarkable ability to ask you really stupid questions. So what if I didn't want to shoot the breeze with him? I took out my cell, ticked in a quick message, then put the phone away and stared out the window.

We'd already left my neighborhood when a mischievous thought crossed my mind. Inconspicuously I pulled out the whistle, waited for the right moment and blew it.

We were just waiting at the crossroads for the lights to change. Predictably, the cabbie hadn't noticed anything, he just poked his finger in his ear. The fluorites, though, weren't long in coming. Today though they were far fewer compared to last night. It must have had something to do with the fact that their swarm was now quite far away.

"What the hell's he doing?" the cabbie cussed. "Has he got his headlights on beam?"

I nodded. "Looks like it. In any case, the lights are green, we can go."

The cabbie pulled away. Only some of the fluorites managed to keep up with us, and after a hundred feet or so, even they were left behind. Not because of the speed, of course. Apparently, they just couldn't decide who to latch on to through the overwhelming noise. And for me it was a valuable piece of intel which I might have to use pretty soon.

The rest of our trip was uneventful. After we'd passed the bridge, we got stuck in traffic for a while due to an accident — but the cabbie masterfully changed lanes, followed by the exquisite cussing of a Volkswagen driver whom he'd cut up. The cabbie even had the cheek to give him a flash in thanks for "letting him through". As we parted, he asked me for a five-star review. I quite liked him. He was funny.

As I watched him disappear in traffic, I mechanically reached into my pocket and was very surprised not to find any cigarettes. Some people had phantom pains — and I must have had phantom habits. So much time had passed that I'd almost stopped thinking of those so-called "little soldiers of death", and here I go again. Then again, could it be just something in my head rather than nicotine addiction? Because I really didn't feel like going to the Community. I didn't even want to contemplate what could happen to Traug and Litius. I hated to lie to them — but I hated to tell them the truth even more. And it's common knowledge that a smoker uses downtime as an excuse for a smoke, especially in moments of anxiety.

Never mind. This wasn't an option anymore.

The Community continued with its daily routine, even though it wasn't quite as busy. I saw a couple of truly wondrous creatures: one a mechanoid beastman, his long crocodile's nose and the right half of his head the only rudiments of his organic nature. The rest of him, including his limbs and all the joints, were metallic parts made of various alloys. And what was the most interesting, he didn't even make an effort to conceal them with layers of clothing. The only thing he was wearing was a piece of fabric covering his chest whose function remained unclear to me.

The other being — who made up part of the mechanoid beastman's retinue — was striking in his beauty. Long chestnut hair, bronze skin, a thin nose and incredible poise for his seven-foot height. His gait was strange: the creature moved in short bouts, as if resting after every step. The gem-studded skirts of his luxurious brocade robe trailed across the snow, leaving a trail behind him. His every movement and gesture were breathtaking.

I was so taken by the sight that I didn't immediately think to check the tags above their heads. The beautiful stranger turned out to be a Kirraket, whatever that was supposed to mean, while the mechanoid was a Manager of the Fourth Order.

They'd clearly arrived just recently, judging by the fact that their group (which also included several mechanoid bodyguards only slightly

less robotized than their boss) was moving away from the Gatehouse. Still, they surprised me yet again when, instead of going to the Sachem's, they headed straight for the market. Somehow I didn't think they'd come out to the sticks just to do a bit of shopping. In any case, I had my own agenda to take care of.

Arts was sitting at her usual place at the table, with one leg tucked up beneath her. Her bad leg, which had only recently been broken and healed, was sticking out and blocking the passage. She was busy drawing, all but poking her tongue out with the effort.

Before everything else, I went and got myself a beer, even though drinking the local brew after the Czech ambrosia was a real sacrilege. But honestly, I was thirsty — and I hadn't yet been spoiled by the good stuff. So I grabbed an Oettinger and sat next to Arts.

"Hi."

"Hi. On the day you stop drinking it's gonna rain frogs."

"It's just we always meet at the wrong time."

"Sure. I've been waiting for you, actually."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Because it's not the kind of thing you discuss over the phone. I've got some buyers for the spear. They're in town but they can't come to the Community. For a number of reasons."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Wait, there's more. They insist that the person who obtained the spear is present at the deal."

"Now I don't like it at all."

“But the money they offer is astronomical. It’s two kilos.”

“How much did you get for the claws?”

“A kilo two hundred grams.”

I just shook my head in amazement. I seemed to be doing it all wrong. Here I was, busting my ass to complete a bunch of stupid missions when all I’d had to do was relieve a few harpies of their manicure. The girl was raking it in!

I froze as it dawned on me. “Wait a sec. If we sell the spear and you get the money, does that mean that you’ll be able to finally sort out your money problems?”

She paused, then gave a suspiciously humble nod. “I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Sure. Don’t mention the number of times I’ve saved your butt. Was it three or four? — I can’t even remember. Never mind. Where do we need to meet them? Mind you, I’m not going to any places of ill repute.”

“I’m not as stupid as you might think. I’ve set up a meeting in the Inn.”

“The restaurant in the center, you mean? “

“That’s the one. This afternoon after 3 p.m.”

I glanced at my watch. I still had loads of time. I could still do some shopping, if only to humor Bumpkin. So I nodded quite happily.

“One problem, though,” I said. “We need to go and check on Traug.”

“I’ve been there already. He doesn’t answer the door.”

“You should try it again, then. Let’s go there together and see what he’s up to.”

We left the place and headed for the Gatehouse. As I walked past a tiny crossroads leading to the shopping street, I once again noticed the funny group of mechanoids hanging about next to Rumis’ shop. What a strange choice. Then I remembered that Rumis wasn’t exactly a 100% Purg, either. Could it be some sort of school reunion?

Traug’s door, which normally stood wide open to all the pretty ladies and booze, was now locked. I studied the lock with the air of an expert burglar (me, for crying out loud!) and scratched the back of my head. This kind of lock required a professional, not a half-blood Korl. Still, even I had a couple of ideas already.

I eased Arts aside to a safe distance, took a few steps back and barged at the door with my best imitation of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Although I didn’t see the actual impact, I heard the cracking of the splintered wood which meant I was on the right track. After my second more enthusiastic attempt, part of the door frame broke out together with one of the boards.

Arts covered her nose. “Gosh it stinks!”

She could say that again. The only thing missing was the train station-style notice, *“Our public toilets are out of order. We apologize for the inconvenience”*. It was the heady mixture of week-old socks, stale booze and unwashed male bodies.

I opened the door wide, not at all in a hurry to get in. Only after my nose had adapted to the stench a little, I finally realized I couldn’t delay the inevitable and stepped inside.

“Jesus Christ almighty,” Arts said behind me. “Had Traug been a fish, I’d have said he was dead. What a stinker!”

“Not a truer word said in jest. They say that you can’t make mulled wine with vodka and rotten onions — but it looks like he at least had tried.”

I studied the heaps of empty bottles, jugs and plastic cans (by the looks of it, he’d even ventured out into town to buy some more booze). This was unbelievable. How strong did one need to be just to be able to drink so much? I had no one to ask, though, because both participants in this drunken symposium lay in each others’ arms on the bed, dead to the world.

Please don’t get me wrong: both were fully dressed, Litius sprawled on the bed with his four legs spread wide, Traug huddling on his side clutching his buddy’s tail. The picture was so peaceful it was a shame to ruin it.

I kicked Traug lightly. No reaction. What a state to get in! I slapped Litius on the cheek, with the same result. I brought my face closer and listened. Both were breathing.

“No good you try,” Arts said, walking over to me with a small bottle made of dark glass, the kind they sell medications in. “They’re high on *stok*.”

“What’s that, some kind of drug?”

“Sort of. It’s an upper that gives you a boost to all your stats while also improving all your mental and physical abilities. “They produce it in Qird.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s three worlds down from here.”

“Okay. And what are the side effects?”

“You’re looking at them right now. The drug’s effects only last for a short while, followed by a period of complete catatonia. A lot of it depends on the quantity... but if they took the whole vial and washed it down with alcohol, you can safely forget them for a couple of days.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s excellent!”

“What do you mean?”

“This is exactly why they won’t be around when Morbian comes. They won’t be dead: they’ll be asleep! This is the best possible scenario. Knowing Traug, he wouldn’t have been able to keep out of it. Let’s go. Let them sleep it off. Having said that...”

I grinned at my rather politically incorrect idea, then started peeling off their clothes: Traug’s first, then Litius’. Given their weight, it wasn’t that easy. I let their undies on, though, then covered them with a bed throw lying on the floor.

“Why did you have to do that?”

“Serves them right. Next time they might think twice before drinking themselves into a stupor. Come on, let’s go.”

I gingerly put the door frame back in and pulled hard. The wood creaked and broke. I reset it again and gave a light knock. It seemed to be holding.

“Listen, Arts, I’ll see you in the Inn. I still have a couple of errands to run. I need to do some shopping...”

“Can I come with you?”

Her question caught me off balance. I froze, rummaging through my brain for the right answer, but couldn’t. In the end, I just shrugged, then

gave it some more thought and nodded.

I exchanged thirty grams of dust for rubles, and we left the Community. I felt pretty ill at ease. Arts and I had this friendly relationship while keeping each other at arm's distance. We could hang out and help each other without encroaching on each other's privacy. And here I was, out to do some shopping with a Player girl — and how was I supposed to take the groceries home? What if she saw Bumpkin? He didn't like that sort of thing. Forget Bumpkin: what if Julia saw us together?

"You aren't gonna dial a cab here, are you?"

"Actually, yes," I said. "We're not within the Community limits, are we?"

"Sergei, Sergei. Look around you. How many houses can you see? The cab's GPS will mark your location as that two-story hovel over here. How many people do you think live there? Eight apartments, if you're lucky. And now think of all the newbie Seekers who dial a cab the moment they exit the Community."

"Oh," I said, realizing my gaffe.

"If you continue like this, you'll get your first warning regarding the Third Rule of Cesspit. Which will put you on the guards' watch list. You really need that?"

I shook my head. Indeed, when I'd come here with Hunter, he'd only stopped the cab when we'd already passed the Community grounds. And when we went back, we took a bus. So that's what it was, then. Another case of live and learn.

So we had to walk another block and call a cab from a totally different street just to get to the farmers' market.

Arts didn’t say a word during the whole ride, making me feel even more uncomfortable. I’d thought she must have had a reason to tag along, like she needed to talk to me about something. But it didn’t seem to be the case which made it even stranger.

Once we got to the market however, she brightened up. Twice she talked me out of buying things, pointing out another stall where the same product was cheaper. I tried to tell her that money wasn’t an issue — only to receive a look of such contempt as if I were a cruel fat bastard gobbling down a double cheeseburger in front of an emaciated African kid.

Although I’d failed to locate some of the items on Bumpkin’s list, by the time I left the market my wallet felt considerably lighter — even though I left it empty-handed. Why empty-handed? — because I’d stuffed all five enormous shopping bags into my inventory! True, my legs felt a little heavier and my back strained somewhat as if I were carrying a 12-pound backpack — while in fact I had enough groceries on me to feed a squadron of hungry rookies for a week.

“That house over there?” Arts asked when the cab pulled up.

“Yeah,” I murmured as I paid.

I had no idea whether I should open the car door for her. On one hand, she was a lady; on the other, she was a buddy. What did etiquette say about cute tomboys you weren’t romantically involved with? I couldn’t remember, either. Thankfully, she put me out of this predicament by climbing out of the car herself.

Just to please, Professor was in his usual place on the bench. He looked Arts over with a look of apparent interest, then smiled softly and even tipped the pompom of his knitted cap. “Greetings and salutations!”

“Hi, Mr. Sergeev,” I hurried to tap the number into the entry system.

The door opened. I slid inside, cursing my immaturity and lack of willpower. Why had I had to bring Arts along? Why, if her presence made me so uncomfortable? Never mind. All I had to do was drop off the shopping, then I'd be back on my way to see our demonic buyers.

I opened the door and promptly spoke in a loud voice to send Bumpkin a message that I wasn't alone.

"Puss, puss, puss... Bump... er, Buddy, I'm home. Daddy's home! Puss, puss, puss..."

"You have a cat?"

"Sure... a shy little thing. He must be cowering in a corner somewhere. Never mind. It won't take me a mome-"

I stopped half-word because my eyes opened wide. Bumpkin popped out of thin air in the middle of the hall and eyed Arts with curiosity — no, with unbridled joy.

"Hi Bumpkin," the girl finally said.

"Hi, Miss Vasilisa."

I froze like a pillar of salt, unable to wrap my head around it. It took me some time to finally ask the pretty obvious question:

"Do you two know each other?"

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Chapter 26

THERE ARE THREE TYPES of surprises: pleasant ones, unpleasant ones and those that knock you off balance. The first ones are pretty self-explanatory. It’s like when you've dragged yourself home in the evening feeling absolutely exhausted and discover a big bag of cherries sitting in the kitchen with a note from your Mom: “*decided to pop by but you were out, thought you might like these*”.

The second type is also pretty obvious. Normally, it’s your boss who comes up with things like an extra work assignment or a business trip to some God-forsaken hole in the ground at a moment’s notice. And yes, they do like to dress it up as something you might really like, saying in a sickly sweet voice, “Boris (or Vladimir, or Sergei), we’ve got a surprise for you!”

Now the third type can be a bit tricky. It’s the Mexican-soap-opera kind where you suddenly discover that some stinking-rich Don Esteban San Jose Maurito is in fact your biological father. You can’t really tell whether it’s good news or bad because in the long run it could be either. And at the moment, it just knocks you off balance, so you just stand there flabbergasted, trying to take it all in.

Which was the kind of feeling I had when I sipped tea in my kitchen feeling I was the odd man out in my own home. Bumpkin was putting the shopping away, nodding his approval at some of the groceries while shaking his head at others. Arts was showering him with questions about his life after the death of a certain Mark. The goblin replied reluctantly in monosyllables, casting occasional glances at me.

“Miss Vasilisa,” I set my tea mug down on the table.

Arts startled — either from the sudden noise or from the sound of her own name.

“How about someone tells me what the hell’s going on between you two?”

“Nothing really,” she gave a curt shrug which was a bit too theatrical really, as if she was trying hard to pretend this was just business as usual. “We used to have a mutual friend, that’s all.”

“Who, Mark? That I gathered. How about clueing me in?”

“There’s nothing to clue you in about,” she said in a raised voice.

Oh wow. She seemed to be really defensive about this. “Okay, okay,” I raised a conciliatory hand. “Don’t tell me if you don’t want to. I’m sure Bumpkin will be happy to oblige.”

The goblin, who until now had been listening intently to our diatribe, made a weird hiccupping sound and disappeared. Yeah right.

“Bumpkin? Come here, please!”

He reappeared momentarily, then vanished yet again. This happened several times until he finally materialized definitively next to a kitchen unit, looking very guilty. His face betrayed such a measure of anguish that even a seasoned SS officer would have been touched to the quick. Still, I absolutely needed to sort out this plot twist right out of an episode of *Santa Barbara*.

“Bumpkin, are you my house goblin or not?”

“I am,” he said fatalistically.

“So you should obey me, right? Do I understand correctly?”

“Yes,” he said meekly.

“If I ask you to do something, will you do it for me?”

“I will,” his voice was so quiet it resembled the squeak of a mouse.

“Stop pestering Buddy!” Arts interjected. “I used to date his old master. Happy now?”

I shook my head. “Not really. You had your chance to speak. I’m speaking to Bumpkin now. Now, sir, how do you know Arts... or rather, Miss Vasilisa?”

He didn’t reply straight away. It took him a while to pluck up the courage. A couple of times, he opened his mouth to speak but reconsidered. After a long pause, he finally said,

“She used to be my old master’s fiancée.”

“Whose, Mark’s?”

He nodded. “Yes. But it’s been almost eight years since they split up.”

“Why was that?”

“Just one of those things,” Bumpkin replied evasively.

“It’s just that Mark turned out to be a real scumbag, which I didn’t realize straight away,” Arts butted in. “He’d rob the pennies off a blind man’s eyes and sell his own mother for a handful of dust.”

I gestured her to stop. “Bumpkin, my dear, mind telling me about your old master?”

“There’s nothing to tell,” he grumbled. “Just a human like any other. Two arms and two legs.”

“Buddy’s not gonna tell you anything,” she interrupted me again, “because Mark was an asshole. *‘Was’* being the operative word. At least when I was with him. House goblins will never badmouth their old masters in front of strangers. And I’m technically a stranger here.”

“Are you?” I asked in surprise.

The goblin nodded. “Miss Vasilisa is a fine upstanding girl. If one day you decide to get married and have a bunch of kids, I’ll be only too happy. You wouldn’t have made a better choice.”

I was a bit taken aback, I have to admit. Not because Bumpkin had all but married us off without even asking our permission, but because he’d called her a ‘fine upstanding girl’. He hadn’t said anything of the kind about Julia although he’d seen her too — and I had actually asked him what he’d thought about her. He’d just found some lame excuse not to answer, the bastard.

“Wait a sec, Bumpkin,” it suddenly dawned on me, “didn’t you tell me that your last master kicked you out? And now it turns out he’s dead? Your statements don’t seem to add up.”

“I wouldn’t say he kicked me out,” Bumpkin said, utterly embarrassed. “More like, he abandoned me.”

Arts laughed, unable to restrain herself. “Bumpkin, please. He’s gonna find out anyway. Basically, Sergei, your house goblin rendered this city an invaluable service. And not just this city but possibly also a couple of neighboring worlds too. Bumpkin killed his old master.”

This bit of news completely bowled me over. To give you an example, when you start dating a girl, you naturally presume she must have had her share of previous affairs. We’re not talking about the cases when you discover that she’s been widowed already three times and you’re the fourth on the list. Probably not the right metaphor to describe my present relationship with Bumpkin but in a way, he too was my.. well, not exactly

my servant but my... assistant? That wasn’t the right word, either. Basically, when I’d taken him on, I’d sincerely presumed that he couldn’t possibly harm me. And now this.

In the meantime, Bumpkin looked utterly distraught. He stood with his head hung low, huge tears rolling down his face onto the lino. And judging by his ever-deepening sobs, he’d only just started.

Arts rose from her chair and took him in her arms to console him. “Bumpkin, it’ wasn’t your fault. It was just an unfortunate coincidence.”

“But I... but that makes me a...”

“It doesn’t make you anything of the sort.”

I got up and went back into the room. What was there to say? You can meet nutcases everywhere but it’s only in a loony bin that they really stand out. And my house looked more like a funny farm with every passing day.

I dialed Julia who replied that she’d only be free in the evening, that she missed me and wanted to see me — and that she needed to have a serious talk with me.

At this point, Arts entered the room.

“Okay, see you later,” I hung up and raised my head quizzically at her.

“He seems to have calmed down a bit. He’s gonna cook now. We’d better leave; it’s about time, anyway.”

She didn’t have to ask me twice. The sight of a weeping girl is bad enough, but a crying goblin is even worse. I hurried to don my trench coat and put my boots on. After a moment’s deliberation, I shouted,

“Bumpkin, I’ll be back this evening!”

“Very well, Master,” his voice rang out meekly from the kitchen.

All’s well and good, then.

“Could you give me the address again,” I asked Arts as I opened the taxi app on my phone.

She unceremoniously grabbed the phone from me and tapped in the street and the house number. Ours seemed to be a strange relationship. We were friends to the point of being almost overly familiar with each other, and still occasionally there was some kind of mistrust between us. It was as if we were afraid of upsetting the fragile harmony of our togetherness.

I took my phone back and checked the map. Her and her secrecy again! We’d still have to walk another block to get to the restaurant.

“It was all a bit of a strange situation, really,” Arts suddenly began to tell me while we headed downstairs. “Bumpkin was cooking something — or he’d just put the kettle on, I can’t remember now. And the gas hob apparently went out. At the time, Mark used to live in a small studio, so both of them got a good lungful of gas. No matter how strong a Player is, you just can’t survive a large dose of methane. Mark tried to get to the kitchen but he only made things worse for himself because the gas concentration was even higher there. He lost consciousness right there and then. It was the stupidest death of a Player in Cesspit over the last hundred years.”

“I never though you could kill a Player with something as trivial as that.”

She shrugged. “Well, if oxygen is so trivial to you, you’d better sign up for that Martian colonization project. You might have a good chance of surviving up there.”

“Okay, okay. But how is it that Bumpkin survived?”

“Firstly, he’s a house goblin. They’re extremely difficult to kill. Secondly, he was further away from the gas hob. He was lucky he wasn’t too attached to Mark, though.”

“Why?” I asked, waving to the cabbie who’d just pulled up in the courtyard.

We climbed into the cab and buckled up. Arts waited for the cabbie to pull away before continuing. This time her voice was so soft I could barely make it out over the noise of the radio.

“Have you ever seen a house goblin who just lost his master?”

“Not a house goblin but I did see a barn hand.”

“Okay. And how did you find him?”

“He was pretty screwed up,” I admitted.

“But Bumpkin, as I gathered, took it pretty well. He kept his sanity, anyway. He suffered, of course, like anyone would. But he was lucky that Mark was such an dickhead.”

“Poor Mark must be turning in his grave now. His asshole is probably on fire.”

“It’s rotting in hell, more likely. In any case, ashes can’t turn in the grave. Why do you think Bumpkin forgot about the gas? He was just too freakin’ busy. His master was a real piece of work. He made sure Bumpkin earned his keep. He'd buy all kinds of ingredients and recipes and force Bumpkin to make potions for him. Some of them were really complex, so he had to watch over them like a hawk. And Mark would just sell them. No idea how he made Bumpkin do that. One day I was there when he brought

two big bags of ‘crazy eyes’ — it’s a plant — and ordered Bumpkin to sift through them. There was no love lost between the two.”

“Why didn’t Bumpkin run off?”

“Once a house goblin enters a house, he can’t leave it. If the relationship between the two becomes strained, his master has the right to set him free or pass him on to another master, provided the goblin goes along with it.”

“Why didn’t you take Bumpkin on yourself?”

“What are you talking about? I’m a loner. I wouldn’t even have pot plants in my house, let alone a sentient creature like this.”

“You did live with Mark though.”

“Yeah, because I was stupid. Also, he’s dead now, isn’t he? Speak well of the dead and all that. Unfortunately, I can’t think of any good things to say about him. So we’d better say nothing.”

As we drove, I kept thinking. Some people seemed to have such a calm and nonchalant bearing which could conceal a bottomless chasm beneath. Arts had always had this air of aloofness about her, bordering on bitchiness. But when she’d spoken about this Mark guy, she’d been literally shaking with emotion. This was the opposite of nonchalance.

And one more thing. According to Bumpkin, Arts and Mark had split up about eight years ago. I’d been seventeen at the time. Which meant that Arts, a. k. a. Miss Vasilisa, was definitely older than me. So much for her teenage appearance. Players just don’t seem to age as we understand it, do they?

Time flies when you’re lost in thought. Especially because the ride was very short to begin with. I paid the cabbie off and got out of the car. By then, Arts was already shuffling around on the sidewalk. Only now did I

realize that she wasn't dressed for the weather. She must have been freezing. If my own wardrobe choice could be explained away by my hot Korl blood, it took me some time to realize that Vasilisa (I had to get used to using her real name now) just wanted to look good. All of her in-game clothes were perfectly color-coordinated. And the handbag — which she really didn't even need because of her inventory — was a perfect match for her shoes. Girls will be girls.

"Let's go," I grumbled, pretending I was quite cold too. "Why did they have to set up a meeting here, of all places?"

"No idea. They don't want to be seen in the Community, I suppose. Also, there aren't many guards around here. The Syndicate is really crap here, and so are the missions. They only post stuff that's already been put out everywhere else. The only interesting thing about it is the bookshop. It's quite pricey though. It's cheaper to go to Moscow or London even."

By then, I'd already worked out what she meant. A new marker had lit up on my map: *Syndicate*. I took out the True Mirror — and it took all of my willpower not to guffaw out loud. This wasn't even a bar but a pawn shop, and a real tiny one at that. Not the kind of place where you should linger or somewhere where you could hang out for a beer. According to Arts, the bookshop was in the backyard behind the restaurant. Very well. Business first, then I could do a bit of antique book shopping.

Well, well, well. If this wasn't the restaurant I'd been to on my very first day in the game! Only this time, no one met me at the entrance. Apparently, they could tell a newb by the insecurity in his or her gaze, their stiff bearing and the lack of spring in their gait. Now, however, I walked in with a confident step, fully intending to order some more of the heavenly drink I'd had with my dumplings the last time. Although still not a patch on Czech beer (which now I knew from experience), it was still a decent brew.

Nobody had paid any particular attention to us, apart from a few players who'd nodded to Arts. The rest gave us a fleeting glance and immediately turned away. That wasn't exactly what I'd expected, was it?

But a few did recognize me too: the Sorcerer bartender and the Teleporter guard. The latter sprang from his place as we entered, blocking the way to a young Archalus behind us.

“I’m very sorry but today there’s a special booking in our club.”

“But I only wanted one drink.”

“A couple of blocks further down the road, there’s Mimosa. It’s a great place. The owner is a succubus. You can get a drink and what-have-you there.”

We took a table. The bartender turned up personally and gave Arts a peck on the cheek. “I did as you asked me to. Today our place is off limits to anyone with feathers. But that’s gonna cost you.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Vasilisa said. “Bring me any kind of salad, as long as it’s without mayo.”

“And your new friend?”

“Just some beer and nuts.”

“We’ve just had a delivery of some very reasonable stout.”

I nodded. The atmosphere here was very laidback. Quite pleasant actually, as if it were a lazy day in mid-June outside, not the end of January. An anchor was mumbling the news on television which was zapping automatically between channels. The patrons spoke in low voices between themselves. The owner was busy clinking crockery behind the bar.

And after another couple of minutes, I realized that my life was now complete. Because the black beer he’d brought me was above reproach. It was chilled to perfection, with a light sweet note to it, so that even regular salted pistachios tasted just great with it.

I was just about to raise my hand to order another one when Arts whispered under her breath,

“There they are.”

I turned my head and very nearly choked on a nut. The room had suddenly become darker due to their huge pompous figures.

Every conversation in the room died down. All eyes were on the newcomers: two Kabirids in full combat gear — apparently, bodyguards — flanking a third one, watchfully protecting their charge: an elderly demon who was surveying the place grimly.

His stooping posture was more than compensated by his impressive height. He had a pair of massive rounded horns, a powerful jaw and a heavy glare. When he brushed his cloak aside, I noticed that half of his left hoof was mechanical. What was it now, some kind of fad?

My Insight identified him as *Demopath*.

His hooded glare checked out the place until it alighted on Arts and myself. He headed for our table. Despite my Katzbalger, moon-steel dagger, a full set of time rewinds and several quite important spells, I still felt very uncomfortable.

“You’re Arts.”

Without waiting for her reply to what probably wasn’t even a question, the Kabirid plonked himself down at our table. The chair was so small for him that the old man had to perch himself on the very edge of it like a constipated pianist. It didn’t seem to faze him in the slightest. His bodyguards were completely ruthless: they simply walked over to the nearest tables and motioned the patrons to go and sit somewhere else. Nobody said a word to them, including the bartender who promptly conjured up a menu. Still, the old man just waved him away.

“Show me the spear.”

Arts pulled it out of her inventory and handed it to the demon. He studied it carefully and shook his head sadly, very nearly brushing me with his horns.

“My last son. He wanted to become a Seeker so badly. He used to dream of leading legions of Kabirids into battle. He wanted to immortalize our name. I did tell him he’d be much better off just buying himself a development branch. But he was so proud and ambitious! He wanted to achieve everything on his own...”

The old man shook his head again, then turned sharply to me, pinning me with his searching glare. I felt I was being turned inside out.

“Was it you who killed him?”

“It just happened,” I said, not knowing how to answer.

“It wasn’t your fault. He chose his own path. It’s just that I never thought that our Little Tin could ever have been defeated by a half-blood human. You must be a very powerful warrior. What’s your name?”

“Sergei... er, Serg. You can call me Serg.”

“I am Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan. I am the last to bear this name until Tin’s children come of age.”

He proffered me his huge hand which I was obliged to shake, feeling highly awkward. I was his son’s murderer, sitting next to his father. I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.

“This spear is very important to me,” he went on. “When my father left on his first foray, his father gave him this spear and told him to use it to immortalize our name. And so he did. Then it was my turn to go to war. Many an Archalus have met their fate on the tip of this spear. When I grew

old, it was Riot’s turn who was my eldest son. He was already a Seeker then. He fell in his third battle. After that, it was Sagrat, then Iriot and now Tin. All my boys are dead now...”

Now I felt really like shit. I couldn’t touch my beer. Never mind this was a real demon sitting in front of me. He was a father first and foremost — a father who’d just lost all of his sons.

“Two kilos, as agreed,” the demopath broke the uneasy silence. He threw a couple of bags of dust on the table which Arts promptly spirited away. “And this is for you,” he handed me a folded sheet of yellowed parchment.

“This is the map of the Orders of Mechilos. I’ll go and live on the tenth one. It’s a lousy old place but still better than Firoll which is constantly at war with somebody. I’ll be moving there with my grandchildren until they grow up. After that, we might move a few Orders higher. But that’s not gonna happen for quite a while. If ever you need anything, you can find me there.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, not knowing what to say.

“You’ve shown yourself to be a worthy adversary and a warrior who knows the meaning of the word *‘honor’*. You didn’t have to bring me this Arichalk spear back. Anyone else would have paid you much more for it. So whenever you need help, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Your reputation has changed to Rigorist.

He shook my hand again, nodded lightly to Arts and left the building with his bodyguards in tow. The displaced patrons showed no intention of reclaiming their places, whispering and pointing at the door — and occasionally, at us. Arts, however, was on the verge of tears as soon as they’d left.

“Holy Jesus, I’m so stupid! I should have shown it to a master swordsmith. Or a good spell modifier. An Arichalk spear! They put a special spell on it so you couldn’t recognize it! All the money we’ve lost! There’re only a few of them in the whole universe!”

“No, we did the right thing,” I cut her short. “That spear meant an awful lot to him.”

“Yeah, but...”

I was forced to raise my voice. “Don’t argue!”

I unfolded the parchment given to me by Ufir von Urt from the Krune clan. How funny. All it contained was a few concentric circles marked with dots which must have signified houses. The tiniest central circle was denoted as Order One. The smaller the circle, the smaller the percentage it was marked with. Order One had 8% inked in next to it. And the largest — Order Ten with one of the houses ringed in red — was at 100%.

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 2.

“What are these percentages all about? I asked Arts.

“It’s the amount of organic matter allowed in order to be able to stay within a certain Order.”

“Wow,” I said. “Some kind of restrictions they have!”

“Of course. The more steel parts you have in your body, the higher you can rise within the Mechanoid hierarchy.”

I remembered the mechanoid beastman. The only organic part still left in him was his head with his enormous crocodile jaws. And he was what, the Manager of the Fourth Order? He must have been a real high flyer.

“Sergei, look here, quick.”

“What now?” I looked up, but all I saw was the back of her head.

The room fell silent. All eyes, including hers, were glued to the television screen. It had switched to some weird Czech channel — a local one, apparently. An elderly woman was standing in front of a busted front door, recounting something very emotional. I didn’t understand the language but there was a ticker tape running below.

“Františka Koláč heard a noise and looked out the window. By then, the door had already been busted off its hinges and the suspect was already inside. After a while, the alleged criminal reappeared on the doorstep, holding a man who appeared to be unconscious. By all accounts, it must have been the house’s owner Radko Pogan. The Prague police had compiled an identikit photo of the suspect.”

The Seers’ mansion had disappeared from the screen, replaced by the sketch of a Player whose face was already familiar to me. Sharp cheekbones, a disdainful look in his eyes and snow-white hair, perfectly clear to me even from this black and white picture.

What a bastard! Being a Player, he must have had Camouflage but apparently he hadn’t even bothered with it.

Arts turned around and gave me a long look.

“It’s already started,” she said in a shaking voice.

Chapter 27

"WHEN CHAOS AND PANIC sweep over the world, you should keep your hair on." Whoever had said this must have been pretty smart. Could have been Plato or Aristotle for all I knew. Or maybe I'd come up with it myself, I can't remember. One thing was for certain: it was a pretty good thought. You can't avoid the inevitable. All you can do is face your fate calmly and with dignity, to the extent of your powers and abilities.

I wouldn't have said that the news of the Grand Master's kidnapping (because even a preschooler could see through the fake "Radko Pogan" identity) had left me as cool as a cucumber. I was both angry and just a tad scared, but I brought my emotions quickly under control. Everything was going exactly as he'd predicted.

"One thing I don't understand is why he would take the Grand Master?" Arts asked over my shoulder. "It would have been much easier to kidnap Oliverio because he can see into the future."

By then, we were already in the antique bookshop just behind the Inn. It was a strange place, so unlike the regular bookstore chains. It was badly lit and crowded with tall bookcases with narrow passages between them. A staircase led down to the basement which must have housed some kind of storeroom. The vendor was a small withered man with a goatee and thick horn-rimmed glasses. His development branch was apparently *Classifier.*

"Because Oliverio's predictions aren't always accurate," I said, putting *The Ancient Cults of Pelnir* aside. "In order to make an accurate forecast, he needs to know the subject well and be able to tune into him. And even so his visions will be rather vague. But the situation with the Grand Master is completely different. He's the opposite of the Oracle."

"How's that?"

“Take a look at this one,” the vendor interrupted her, offering me a small fat tome. “*A Brief History of Cesspit from Heracles to Orator*.”

“Who’s Orator?”

“Hitler,” Arts replied. “So why do you think that the Grand Master is the opposite of the Oracle?”

“Okay, okay, I overstated the case. His powers aren’t the same as the Oracle’s. His development branch is probably not up to it. But I still stand by what I’ve just said. The Oracle could see the future of any person whatsoever while the Grand Master — the Eternity Weaver — can do the same with the person’s past. And the closer he is to the subject, the more accurate the information is.”

“That’s why he needs the Grand Master alive in order to catch you.”

“Exactly. What happened a mere minute ago is also already in the past. So finding me isn’t going to be quite so easy as that. Also, didn’t the Grand Master say that we still had a couple of days? He must have already planned on resisting him.”

“The Horseman will torture him, that’s for sure. Me, I would have just told him everything on the spot. Especially when you know that you can’t change anything.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I scooped up three of the books and gave the vendor a quizzical look.

“Sixty grams,” he said without batting an eyelid.

“So!”

Arts sniggered. “I did tell you this place wasn’t cheap.”

I measured out the right amount while contemplating the state of our publishing business. In my opinion, book vendors were the weakest link in the production chain from the author to the reader and were bound to ruin the industry by hiking up their prices.

“Let’s go,” I said.

I had bought three books: *A History of Cesspit*, *A Traveler’s Guide to Purgator’s Five Biggest Cities* and *The Origins of the Land of Noggle*. I put them away in my inventory: at least it would give me something to read in my spare time.

“So now, where was I?” I said when we’d walked out into the snowed-in courtyard. “The Grand Master won’t do anything to upset the course of events which have already been predicted. I think this is the only thing that gives him strength while also preventing him from taking action. Otherwise, he would already have told us everything a long time ago. Never mind. How’s your thing coming on?”

“I’m seeing the mugger tomorrow.”

“A mugger?” I said, remembering the circumstances in which I’d first heard the word.

“Just don’t give me that holier-than-thou look!”

“I’m not. I’m coming with you. What time is it? Where are you meeting him?”

She shrugged as in, *suit yourself*, but answered anyway. “One p.m. He’ll send me a message.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

We parted ways without bothering to shake hands or exchange kisses. Arts — who now had a veritable king’s ransom stashed away in her

inventory — dove into a gateway while I headed for the bus stop. My parents' place wasn't very far, and I needed to take a little stroll to put my thoughts in order.

Morbian was one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. He was also one of the most powerful Players around. According to the Grand Master, his development branch had something to do with sleep. I should have asked him for more details, but I'd been too confused at the time to even think about it. Never mind. Logically, he should have an awful lot of both health and mana. So he was bound to cast Mantle as well as some protection against spells. Which meant I'd only have one chance — provided I was right in my deductions.

"Excuse me, how do I get to Gordeev Street?"

I smiled. Talk about déjà vu. The old lady was different, of course: a down-lined lilac coat, a sports cap and short padded boots. Unlike the befuddled expression of the lady I'd met on my first day in the game, this one had a serious, focused look in her eyes.

"You need to take the bus over there," I pointed at the bus shelter. "Let me help you."

Gingerly I supported her by the elbow. She showed no intention of resisting me. I waited for the traffic lights to change and helped her cross. The bus she needed was just pulling up by the shelter, so I directed her straight there.

"Thank you," she said calmly without showering me with the usual platitudes or wishing me a long life, a good wife and other appropriate blessings.

You've helped a Commoner who is neutral to you.

+20 karma points. Current level: +2100. You gravitate to the Light Side.

I sighed. I only had another 149 old ladies to help cross the street.

I had a funny feeling that I might not be getting any more freebies from my Divine Avatar for a while.

* * *

When I arrived at my parents' place, you could have cut the air there with a knife. Dad mumbled a half-hearted hello while Mom trotted right past me with yet another salad in her hands. My younger sister rolled her eyes and made a gesture like she was going to hang herself. I could see they were already fully prepared to meet their new in-law: the knives were already out and sharpened.

"Mom? Look what I've found," I said, handing her Grandma's recipe book.

"Jesus. I thought we'd lost it."

She slumped onto a chair leafing through it and shaking her head occasionally. Then she jumped up, shrieked "The chicken!" and dashed back into the kitchen.

"Fancy a smoke?" Dad suggested.

"I quit."

"Really? I didn't think it was gonna last."

"Well, thanks a bunch for your support. Let's step out for a breath of fresh air, anyway."

"Sergei!" Mom shouted, bustling past with yet another plateful. "Put your hat and coat back on first! You'll catch your death of cold!"

So I had to make a detour back to the coat rack.

“So, how’s life in general?” Dad asked the moment we were outside, clicking his lighter. He seemed to be looking into the distance, not at me.

“Everything’s going great.”

“And... your job? The new one, I mean?”

“It’s not without its problems but I’m quite happy with it. It’s given me a totally new prospective. They money’s good too. And I get to travel quite a bit.”

‘So you like it, then?”

Mom tapped on the window and motioned with her eyes, signaling that they were waiting for us.

“Okay, let’s go back inside,” Dad said, putting out his cigarette.

I had the feeling that he’d wanted to impart something very important — but either he couldn’t find the appropriate moment or the right words. For the first time in my life, he didn’t seem to doubt me nor my choice. The conversation had simply not happened. Oh well.

“The intercom’s just rung. They’re on their way up,” Mom said.

“Here we go again,” Darya said, already sitting at the table staring at her phone. “We’re gonna get the whole song and dance routine now.”

I chuckled. The potential son-in-law was about to get the full measure of our family life. So I walked into the room, leaving my parents to greet him. It was already bad enough for the poor bastard. I took a seat next to my sister and started plucking grapes.

“That’s not how you spell *turnt*,” I told her.

She looked up from the phone. “How do you know I wrote it?”

Good question. She was holding her phone at a discreet angle to make sure her correspondence remained private.

“Magic,” I smiled, commending my Insight. “And who’s the lucky guy that you managed to snag?”

“That’s none of your business,” she hissed.

“Okay, okay. Our Dad is quite capable of figuring out what you guys are gonna get up to in Dorward. It’s a night club, isn’t it?”

She rounded her eyes. “Are you nuts?” she whispered. “You have any idea what he’s gonna do to me if he finds out?”

‘Sure. He’ll ground you, stop your pocket money and he might even disconnect the Internet.”

She looked daggers at me. She had some temper, my sister. She must have taken after Dad in that respect.

“Let’s make a deal,” I suggested. “You stop picking on me, and I won’t tell Dad about your escapades. Because you probably told him you were sleeping over at a friend’s?” I made the sign of air quotes.

“Blackmailer,” she knitted her eyebrows, just like Dad, then proffered me her hand. “Deal.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 15.

We shook on it. At least something had come out of it.

“How do you do,” I heard Mom’s sickly sweet voice in the hallway. “Please do come in.”

“Here we go,” Darya said fatefully, putting her phone away. “”Welcome to the Rocky Horror Show.”

I grinned and plucked a few more grapes. I honestly didn’t know what I had to do with the whole thing. Meeting a prospective fiancé is purely a parents’ job. Dad was going to ask him about his job and prospects for the future while Mom would inquire about how long they’d already been dating. In short, a whole bunch of laughs.

Still, our guest managed to surprise me. He was rather short and swarthy with narrow shoulders and a pair of small rudimentary wings folded behind his back. I very nearly choked on a grape. I used my Insight to inspect him from head to toe but no, he wasn’t a Player, only a *Traditionalist*, whatever that was supposed to mean. I could only imagine the fruit of this union: a bunch of half-Korls/half-Archali with a smidgeon of human blood thrown in for a good measure. Darya had a point: this was indeed a freak show.

“I’m Max,” the swarthy guy said, proffering his hand.

“Sergei.”

I really didn’t like the expression with which he’d said it. His gaze was sharp and self-assured which didn’t at all agree with his projected image of a struggling college student, or whatever he was supposed to be.

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Intuition ability.

You've gained the Intuition ability.

You’ve gained a hidden secondary attribute: Subconsciousness

Aha. So I wasn't that mistaken, after all. This guy definitely had a skeleton in his closet. He showed an apparent interest in me — and I could say the same about myself now.

"Hi," Lily gave me a hug.

I forced a smile. "Hi."

"I'll just take the chicken out of the oven," Mom said.

Five minutes later, we were already sitting at the table toasting our friendship and piling our plates with food. From time to time, Dad tried to trip him up with loaded questions but Max gave him all the right responses. Or rather, he gave him the answers Dad wanted to hear. He was in his last year in college and already doing field work for a large company which was going to take him on after graduation. His current position wasn't particularly well-paid but it offered good promotion opportunities. He neither smoked nor drank alcohol, apart from big social occasions like this one. He was really into track and field although he'd been forced to stop training due to an injury. In other words, give him another fifteen years and he could run for President.

I didn't like him at all. Not just because he'd quickly charmed the socks off everyone — and that Lily looked at him like a cat that got the cream — but because I kept catching the occasional fleeting glance he'd been giving me. I got the impression that he knew too much about me.

Oh Lily, Lily. What kind of mess have you got yourself into?

After about an hour, he rose. "My apologies, but we have to leave. I've got theater tickets for tonight. It was a pleasure meeting you all. I so enjoyed your cooking, Valeria. The meal was fantastic. Sir," he nodded, shaking Dad's hand. "Sergei, Darya."

I strained my face into the semblance of a smile. As if I didn't have enough problems without my sister dragging yet another one in. Our

handshake lasted several seconds and was so hard as if it were a grip competition.

“Okay, Sergei, okay. Let go of him. We need to dash,” Lily said, beaming with happiness.

As soon as the door closed behind them, a discussion ensued.

“He seems to be a decent young man,” Mom said, turning to Dad.

“Yes, he seems to be quite down to earth,” Dad replied, looking at me but saying nothing.

That was funny. Normally, he would have made some wisecrack on my account.

“Quite pragmatic,” Dad continued. “And he treats Lily really well.”

“Sergei? What do you think?”

“Any port in a storm,” I said, avoiding a direct reply.

“Oh come on. He’s just an asshole,” Darya yawned without looking up from her phone.

“Darya!” Mom said sternly.

“Why, what did I say? She always dates assholes. Then she comes and cries on your shoulder. It’s just her thing.”

“Darya, go to your room *now*!” Dad said.

“All right already!”

“I’ll be off as well,” I said. “Thanks for dinner, Mom. See you later, Dad.”

“There’s still the cake,” Mom offered unenthusiastically.

“I’m already stuffed. See you around, guys.”

I hurried to get dressed and dashed outside. I wasn’t in the best of moods. I took my phone and dialed Julia. “Hi there.”

“Sergei? Hi.”

“Can you come to my place?”

“I don’t know. I need to see what my parents are up to. I’ll get back to you.”

I took a cab home. Pretty soon, every cabbie in town would know my face. By then, Julia had already texted me to say that she was coming, with the addition of one brief word, “*overnight!!!*”

I could sense the smell of burning already by the front door. You know how it feels when you walk upstairs to your apartment smelling the aroma of home cooking from behind your door. You unlock it with bated breath and smile because you guessed it right. Here, it was the same only directly the opposite.

Without removing my boots, I walked over to the kitchen. Bumpkin was sitting there all tearful next to a blackened oven tray. It must have been fish, by the looks of it.

“Come on, kick me out,” Bumpkin managed between sobs. “I’m a useless house goblin. I killed my old master with my own hands and I keep busting things around here. Before, at least I could cook. And now look at this,” he waved a desperate hand.

Oh no, this wasn’t the way to go. I had to shake him out of his depression. “Why is the house like a pigsty?!”

He jumped at the angry sound of my voice.

“Why isn’t the meal ready?” I kept grilling him. “We’ll have a visitor in a minute! Am I supposed to listen to your excuses? Or do you want me to tell all the other house goblins about your domestic prowess?”

He was so dumbfounded he even stopped crying. “It’s just... just...” he managed between the residual fitful sobs. “The fish... it just...”

“Well, cook something else, then! It’s not as if we don’t have enough food in the house!”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he started bustling about, picking up the tray.

Much better, I thought, suppressing a happy grin. Losing heart after every little failure isn’t a healthy habit at all. We only live once — so if you keep constantly throwing in the towel, what good can you do?

“And the bathtub needs cleaning!” I shouted from the bathroom, picking up the bottle of tub cleaner.

He promptly reappeared next to me and tried to wrestle the bottle away from me. I told him to get lost — in his kitchen duties, I mean.

Having finished cleaning the tub, I opened the faucets and climbed in even before the tub was completely full. What a bliss. I opened the interface and admired my new skill.

Intuition (Subconsciousness). The ability to fully grasp, epiphany-style, both the meaning and significance of certain events without the need for rational deduction.

Okay. So the ability was passive. I got that. But where could I invest skill points in order to add to its awesomeness? Could it be because of this strange new attribute I’d received so unexpectedly?

Subconsciousness: the area responsible for all psychic and metaphysical processes which don't get registered in our consciousness and which can't be consciously controlled by the user.

Not a single stat! Which meant that I couldn't level it up, either. It was there, and that was the extent of it. You could study it and focus on it all you wanted, but it wasn't gonna change a thing. Talk about a useless gift.

I paused, basking in the hot water for a while, then left the new attribute well alone and opened my inventory bag.

I pulled out *A Brief History of Cesspit* and leafed through it. Published in 1936 by Beta Books in Cyrillia. Print run: 300 copies.

Just out of curiosity, I leaned out of the tub and fished the true mirror out of my pocket. What would it look like to a commoner's eye?

Yeah right. *A Paratrooper in Ancient Greece: A Time Traveler's Diaries Book 5.* Very funny, haha. Disguising a secret history of a clandestine world as a sci-fi penny-dreadful.

Without expecting too much, I decided to read a few pages and... and I got completely engrossed in it. Nothing like this had happened to me in quite a while. I'd completely stopped reading in high school — in fact, at the time I'd only showed up at home to grab a few hours of sleep. I was a teenager like any other, after all. In college, I'd been obliged to read whatever we'd been given, but it was skimming rather than reading. But I couldn't remember actually taking pleasure in what I read. And this was a page-turner.

After a good twenty minutes, I forced myself away from the book, noticing that my Axiology had risen 1 pt. By then, I'd already learned that the so-called Heracles had been one hell of a cool dude. His development branch was Crasher. In fact, the number of deeds he'd performed was twenty-two, not twelve. Also, he hadn't died at all. He'd just gone into

hiding from all the prying eyes. No one really knew what had happened to him afterwards.

I moved on to find out more about another guy known to us as Achilles — a. k. a. Pyrrisis — whose development branch was Skin of Steel, when I got a funny feeling — more like *knowing*, really — that I really should call it a day and climb out of the tub before Julia came. I had a quick wash, got out and toweled myself down just in time before the doorbell rang. I already started to love this Intuition thing.

Julia was standing in the doorway — rosy-cheeked with the frost, a stubborn lock of hair escaping from under her knitted cap. She was apparently taken aback by seeing me in my undies.

“What are you doing here half-naked?” she demanded.

“That’s not half-naked. That’s more like 11/12 naked. I’ve just climbed out of the tub.”

“Go and get dressed, then,” she said, closing the door behind her.

“Why?” I smiled, giving her a big hug.

“Because your hair’s wet,” she offered a half-hearted excuse. “What’s with all this, can’t you wait? You’re like a young recruit on leave!”

But she’d already flung her arms in the air, draping them around me, her tongue greedily replying to my kiss.

Later, as her head rested on my chest, she said sleepily, “What’s all this, can’t you stop reading? Let’s get some sleep. It’s late already.”

“Just one minute, okay? I just find it very interesting.”

My sweetheart drowsily turned the book to herself and looked at the cover. “*Quantum Mechanics*. Are you a mechanic?”

I smiled. “Yep. A quantum one.”

I stroked her hair. She mumbled something under her breath and fell asleep.

Half an hour later I too set the book aside, unable to keep my eyes open, but not before I saw the coveted message,

Your Axiology skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve achieved Mastery in the following skill: Axiology

Mastery level: 1

New advanced skill available: Subvocalization. Allows you to vividly recreate particularly memorable book scenes in your imagination.

My eyelids lowered by themselves, conjuring up an image of the powerful Heracles overcoming a Player whose development branch was *Stunner*. Nicknamed Lion, he’d also been known as the Lion of Nemea, after the province where he’d lived at the time. I also thought I glimpsed a man standing nearby watching them who looked like the spitting image of my mentor.

The things you dream!

Chapter 28

THEY SAY THAT YOU NEED to live each day as if it were your last. Not a bad philosophy, considering the unhealthy interest that one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse had in my humble self. This day could indeed become my last. Or the day after, maybe. In any case, had I indeed been as close to death as I actually was, this was how my perfect last morning would have begun.

I awoke to the gentle touch of claws on my shoulder. Bumpkin was standing next to the bed.

“Should I get breakfast going, Master?” he whispered, casting glances at Julia.

“Please,” I mouthed back.

He vanished. I heard the kitchen door close, followed by a quiet clattering of skillets.

I stretched out and smiled. A beautiful girl by my side; a house goblin busy in my kitchen, whose devotion to me rivaled that of a Border Collie; a hundred grams of dust still sitting in my inventory. There’s only one problem with these moments of absolute bliss: they’re all bound to come to an abrupt and unexpected end.

I slipped out of the bed and tiptoed into the bathroom lined with ancient Soviet-era tiles of indeterminate color. I really should have the place redecorated.

A hot and cold shower promptly brought me back in order. Despite the rough night, I felt like an astronaut on the morning of his launch.

“What’s that you’ve cooked?” Julia asked me, stretching in bed.

“Just a quick something. Are you hungry, baby?”

“I’m absolutely ravenous.”

Mentioning ‘a quick something’ had been a bit imprudent of me, I have to admit. I’d forgotten about quite a few things: firstly, that Bumpkin had always taken his responsibilities very seriously; secondly, that I’d been careless enough to have just bought a whole week’s worth of groceries; and thirdly, that after his emotional collapse last night, Bumpkin was doing everything he could to get back in my good books.

That’s why the kitchen welcomed us with what looked a five-star hotel buffet spread. Sausages, eggs, porridge, omelets, cottage cheese patties, several ham pancakes (about twenty, to be precise), a bunch of chocolate pancakes (a treat which I’d only discovered very recently), not to mention various miscellanea like cold cuts and a cheese plate.

“When did you make all this?” Julia asked, not knowing what to begin with.

“Got up a bit early, that’s all,” I said, feeling just as speechless as she was. “Wanted to make you a surprise.”

There was no way we could eat it all, of course. Even my whole family wouldn’t have managed that. We just took a few bites of each, as Julia praised what she must have believed to be my culinary genius. I decided not to tell her that the genius in question was currently rustling with something under the bathtub, playing the part of a smug lazy cat.

“What about that serious talk you wanted to have with me?” I asked casually.

She stared at her pancake so hard as if conferring with it whether or not to tell me. The pancake’s advice must have been affirmative because she

uttered the few words which every young man fears the most:

“My parents would like to meet you.”

I choked on my omelet and exploded in a bout of coughing, buying some think time. How were you supposed to stay an atheist after this? Hadn’t I received a personal message from a higher being only yesterday by being present at my parents’ own “fiancé show”?

In actual fact, I had several options. I even felt like I was sitting in the uncomfortable guest chair at Who Wants To Be A Millionaire.

Option A: Flee. Escape without a trace, changing my address and phone number.

Option B: Agree to a couple of hours of shame. Wear my best button-up shirt, brush my hair (or even cut it, as the case may be) and remember all my childhood manners. Realize that there was no way back.

Option C: Tell my date that despite all the love and respect I had for her, I had no desire to meet her family at the moment. The beauty of this particular option was that every word of it was true. Still, the old adage “honesty is the best policy” was as far removed from real life as a Californian billionaire’s lifestyle from welfare.

Option D. Find an urgent business as an excuse to reschedule the event, fully realizing that this was only a lame attempt to delay the inevitable.

“I know it’s too early,” Julia said, tapping me on the back. “But they insist.”

“It’s all right,” I said, wiping away the tears. “I just didn’t expect it, that’s all.”

I took a sip of tea and added in a calmer voice, “I’d love to meet them, but I can only do it in a couple of days. I have a bit of an emergency at work. We’re waiting for a new worker to arrive who’s gonna take on some of my workload. Once I shift some of my duties to him, everything will be hunky dory. I’ll come and meet them straight away.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 9.

Hunky dory... or *not*. In which case meeting my girlfriend’s parents would be the least of my problems. Still, I’d love to know how things would unfold once I was dead. At moments of bitter resentment, all children must have imagined themselves dead just to spite their parents and friends who would cry and weep, suddenly realizing their loss. They would utter their sobbing regrets, promising to forgive and forget just as your coffin was being lowered into the cold earth. At moments like these, upset children begin to cry because they feel so terribly sorry for themselves.

But me, I was just curious. There was also a nagging sense of guilt because I had no idea how my parents were going to take it. Because one thing that’s even worse than the death of your own child is when he or she goes missing. And that’s what was going to happen to me: I would just go missing.

All this had flashed through my head as Julia plastered me with kisses of gratitude. Which meant I’d chosen the right option. Thankfully, my young body had its own way of cutting my ruminations short, putting an end to our breakfast and restoring our previous horizontal status quo.

“Will you take me home?” Julia asked.

“Absolutely. I can dial a cab for you.”

She shook her head. “Oh no. Too much of a good thing.”

“If you wish.”

As we left the building, we walked right into Professor who brought his clenched hand to his mouth in a fake bout of coughing, trying to conceal his smile. Still, my Insight saw right through his little trick. I could only imagine what he was thinking, seeing me with two different girls on two consecutive days. Not that I gave a damn. Why should his opinion worry me?”

Having parted with Julia, I stumbled back home with a halting gait. My heart was overflowing with happiness and blissful anticipation (which was completely wrong, given the situation). All my movements became loose, my vigilance had dropped dangerously close to zero.

I also received a text message from Arts saying,

Switzerland Recreation Park, by the central monument, 6 p.m.

Which was probably why, as I approached my house’s front door, I didn’t even bother to look up. Which was pretty stupid, I agree. Had it not been for my new skill, even my time rewind ability wouldn’t have saved my sorry butt this time.

A shudder ran through my body. All of a sudden I felt a desperate urge to duck and leap aside, so strong that I couldn’t really resist it. This was probably what animals sense in perilous moments between life and death.

The icicle crashed to the ground just by my left foot: a giant block of ice several feet wide which disintegrated on impact, spewing great lumps of ice toward me. Wouldn’t it have been ironic if Sergei the Time Master had died right here and now, before he’d even met Morbian?

You’ve taken the first step toward acquiring the Luck ability.

You could say that. I looked up and glimpsed a movement on the roof just in time. I pushed the door open and dashed upstairs. My legs soon

felt leaden, my calves completely numb. Still, the Game must have decided to reward me for this unscheduled training practice:

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 10.

You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Athletics

Mastery level: 1

The restoration rate of your fluid and electrolyte balance has increased. The activation rate of your enzyme, protein and amino acid synthesis has increased.

Although I was by no means an athlete, even I knew enough to understand that it would now take my muscles less time to restore after exercise. Still, at the moment the gift went unappreciated: I was literally seething inside.

I ran out onto the roof to discover two individuals in overalls. One of them was holding an ax, the other a pick. They must have been maintenance workers sent to remove the icicles from the roof. Indeed, our building seemed to have an icicle problem because, despite the excellent heating system, the ceiling insulation was less than useless, and the loft was freezing in winter. Apparently, this forced warm air to rise and melt the snow along the edges of the roof, forming giant icicles. It had been Professor who'd shared this little house maintenance secret with me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded, furious.

"We're knocking the icicles down," one of them replied good-naturedly.

I strode over to him and grabbed him by his lapels. They didn't even have safety harnesses on. They'd probably never even heard about safety measures.

The man turned out to be remarkably light. As his boots lost contact with the icy surface, his eyes betrayed animal fear. I forced his head closer to the roof's edge. His partner tried to pull us both back but without much success. That must have been the Korl blood awakening in me.

"Hey, man? Whatcha think you're doing?" the poor bastard croaked, looking up at me. "We didn't mean it, man. Hey!"

It took all of my willpower to restrain myself. This was wrong. I realized it now. I flung the unfortunate dude aside and tried to calm myself down.

How weird. I'd have never done anything like this before. I might have snapped at them and called them a pair of idiots, and that would have been the extent of it. But now... now I'd been quite prepared to smash them both to pulp.

"You idiots! Don't you understand you could have killed somebody?"

"We did look," my intended victim attempted to explain.

"Well, you should have looked better! Why didn't you just cordon it off? Why isn't there anybody down below supervising you? One of you should wear a safety harness while the other one should be downstairs watching that no idiot enters your work zone. How simple is that?"

You've taken the next step toward acquiring the Leadership ability.

The other one frowned. "You really should mind your language."

You wouldn't exactly call him fit. He was big but that's because he was rather fat. Probably, the only sport he'd ever done was the beer run between the fridge and the couch.

“How about you go and screw yourself?” I said, unable to stop myself.

“You what?” the man said, indignant, as he lumbered toward me.

A roof covered in a thick uneven layer of ice isn’t the best place to pick a fight. Especially when your opponent is a Player, and very pissed at that. I didn’t wait for him to approach. With a giant leap, I was immediately upon him, investing all my pent-up anger into one punch. The worker dropped on his side and blacked out.

One-shot.

You’ve attacked a Commoner who is neutral to you.

-20 karma points. Current level: +2000. You gravitate to the Light Side.

“Did I make myself clear?” I asked the other one who was scared witless, although I didn’t even know what I really meant by it myself.

He frantically nodded his agreement, as in: *don’t you worry, we’ve learned our lesson*. I walked over to the edge and took another look at the smashed icicle on the tarmac below. That’s what my head might have looked right now had I not been so lucky.

I shrugged and headed back home while the hapless ice exterminator tried to bring his partner around.

My anger vanished like a thunderstorm on a beach when all the rainwater had been soaked up by the ground, leaving nothing but clumps of wet sand behind. I didn’t feel I’d been in the wrong. I had neither remorse nor pity, only a slight concern about my own karma and a potential danger of losing the additional abilities my Avatar offered.

And this was a very bad wake-up call. Something quite bad seemed to be happening to me because the old Sergei would have done nothing of the sort.

Then again, was it really so bad?

I opened my apartment door with mixed feelings. Bumpkin was sitting next to the chandelier, looking like a guilty dog. And so he should, because the chandelier wasn't dangling from the ceiling as normal but was lying in a heap on the floor.

"I just wanted to polish it," Bumpkin said without taking his huge eyes off me.

At this point, I'd completely simmered down. Everybody should have some sort of release valve like this at home. When you leave work angry and uptight, tired as hell because your spear hadn't been sharp enough to finish off a wounded mammoth or because you and the other hunters had failed to sell the skin before you'd actually caught the bear — at moments like these, you enter your house and all you can see is a pair of big tearful eyes looking pleadingly at you. So you pick up the hammer and fix whatever need fixing and hey presto! — the problem's solved. And that's the end of it. Who needs an animal hide when you can have a polyester comforter? Or who wants to eat a mammoth burger when you can have spaghetti carbonara? Never mind you're not your hunter gatherer ancestor but a regular city dude: you're still a man. And that brings your self-esteem back to its normal level.

I walked over to the fuse box and cut the power. Then I went into the kitchen for a bunch of old-fashioned lamp sockets left over by my grandfather. I hooked one up to a length of electric cable which I then joined to a connector block with the help of a test screwdriver, then joined the other end to the remains of the chandelier still hanging on the ceiling.

I switched the power back on. It wasn't very bright but it would have to do. The chandelier was very old, anyway, and two of the shades

were mismatched. I'd buy myself a new one.

You've taken the first step toward acquiring the Electrical Engineering ability.

Better than nothing.

"Bumpkin, I'd like you to gather up all the bits before somebody cuts themselves. And stop shaking, please. I'm not gonna kick you out."

I plonked myself down in the armchair and resumed my reading.

Rethnor, Krein, Burroth, Dijker and Sortonhir. The great city states of Purgator, off limits to even such powerful beings as the Archali and the Kabirids. I'd already skimmed through the chapter earlier the previous evening, just to bring my Axiology up a notch. And to tell you the truth, I can't say I was that interested. It was a bit like reading a history of some arcane tribe on the other side of the globe. The history of Cesspit was a totally different thing of course, when all the wars in known history had started as a petty scuffle between a bunch of Players.

It's common knowledge that history is written by the victors. It's just the way it has always been and always will be. If we've already begun to differ in our judgements regarding events that only happened fifty years ago with all the eyewitnesses still alive, what about the early centuries of human history I'd just been reading about?

Still, this morning I wasn't in the mood for learning. My eyes skimmed over the lines without any meaning sinking in. My thoughts were far away — but every time I tried to focus on them, they slipped out of my grasp. There was a good word for this kind of mental state: stupor.

I threw my head back and closed my eyes. What a strange day.

I awoke with a new sense of urgency. The training session. This Intuition thing was better than an alarm clock. Admittedly, I was a bit

worried about how Hunter would receive me. Would he come at all after yesterday's escapade? Which was his fault actually. He shouldn't have provoked me.

Thankfully, he was already there, waiting patiently with his frozen hands stuck under his armpits. On seeing me, he nodded and drew his weapon as if nothing had happened. Good. It was even better this way.

"A stick," I said, breathless.

"It's not a stick. It's a bō."

I shrugged. "Okay. A bō."

Immediately I collapsed to the ground as the stick — the bō — swept my legs from under me.

"Hey, what's up?" I gasped. "We haven't started yet!"

"Just to keep you on your toes."

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood...

Here we go again...

* * *

"Enough," Hunter said with a nod. "You're all black and blue."

"It's all right," I scrambled back to my feet. "I have a truly magical potion for that. We aren't finished yet. I need another skill."

Hunter shrugged. "You're stubborn, you know that?"

The Seeker is inviting you to compete Until First Blood...

There was nothing inviting about his style. He was flailing me alive, cruelly and mercilessly. I don't think he was trying to get even with me because with all my Observation Skills I'd failed to detect any trace of enjoyment in his eyes. It might have hurt, but at least I'd received another level in Acrobatics (which had taken me two time rewinds in a row) as well as Unarmored Combat. I only had one skill left till the coveted level 10. One miserable little skill.

"You should stop opening up when I hit you," he poked me lightly with his stick. "At least try to pretend you're not enjoying it."

"I'm trying to."

"Don't just try. Do it," he said with another lightning-fast lunge.

However, this time I decided not to use the time rewind. I just focused on my inner sensations, then stepped to my left and threw the Katzbalger forward.

Your Blocking skill has increased to level 5.

You've reached level 10.

"Now we're done," Hunter said, putting his stick away. "Your trench coat, does it adapt to the owner's level?"

"How did you work that out?"

"Take a look at it."

I did. Oh wow. Its skirts had changed from gray to brown. I just couldn't help it. I had to check my interface.

Destroyer Mage's Trench Coat

Adaptable to owner's level

+500 to mana.

+16 to damage from all Destruction spells used by the owner.

+11% to absorption of all hostile Destruction spells.

+7% to parrying of all hostile Destruction spells.

My mouth stretched into a beaming smile. Mostly because of the mana, of course. Life seemed to be looking up.

"Now tell me about your journey to Crete," Hunter said.

I heaved a sigh and embarked on the long tale of my fruitless trip to Greece. How else was I supposed to describe it, if I hadn't even managed a dip in the sea because of some predatory individuals?

The funny thing was, Hunter didn't seem at all interested in the Horsemen part but as soon as I mentioned Talsian, he was all ears.

"He didn't mention any blood mages, did he?"

"Is this something to do with the Chorul?"

Hunter didn't answer, he just nodded. After a pause, he tapped a finger on his forehead and added, "The Chorul said that your life was of extreme value. Incredibly so. That's why I got so het up when I found out about the dangers you'd been putting yourself in."

"And what makes my life so important? Are you gonna tell me or are you gonna get all evasive again and just drop hints?"

"You're capable of either bringing equilibrium into this world, or the biggest chaos one can imagine. It's all down to you. Logically, the Chorul

used to think that you'd choose equilibrium."

"Did he say anything about the Horsemen?"

"He did, although he didn't mention any particular one. He just said that you had everything you needed in order to defeat Morbian."

"I was so afraid you might find out."

"You shouldn't have. It's not my battle. I'm not going to help you. It's time for the boy to become a man."

"Hunter, you didn't know Heracles, by any chance?" I asked unexpectedly for myself.

He gave me a long look which was too attentive for comfort. Then he just slapped my shoulder and said with a grin,

"Let's go. Time to get back."

Once back home, I had another luscious dinner from one of Bumpkin's medieval recipes, then opened my interface. Level 10 required some extra attention.

Available points: 3

Strength 29 (x)

Intellect 19 (X4)

Fortitude 26 (x)

Agility 26 (x)

Stamina 21 (x)

Rhetoric 24 (x3)

Speed 16 (x)

An upgrade of your current development branch is available. You have two of the following options:

- decrease the number of charges required for each use by 1

or

- decrease cooldown time 1 sec

Right, let’s do it in order of relevance. Intellect... Rhetoric... and... — ah, come what may! — and Speed. Next. Another point to charges, and I can upgrade my development branch. I’d already decreased my cooldown time once, and 4 seconds seemed to be quite enough. In which case, let’s decrease the number of charges. Where was it... yes! All done. Now each time rewind would only cost me 9 charge points.

“Bumpkin? Where’s that potion of yours?”

He materialized almost instantly with a glass of nauseating swill. I held my breath — because I just couldn’t force myself to smell it — and gulped it down in three huge swigs. Then I gave the glass back to him and promptly curled up on the bed.

I awoke just after 4 p.m. My shoulder was still aching a little, like an old long-healed wound. I downed some hot freshly-made soup just to wake myself up, then dialed a cab. The Switzerland Recreation Park started behind the main city bridge.

I arrived way in advance and spent some time loitering by the central entrance. Then I entered the park grounds and wandered around for a bit. The place was disgustingly deserted. Boring. I walked all the way down to the kebab house which was open even now, despite being winter

time. I wasn’t really hungry but I just had to do something to while away the time — and with any luck, bump into that mysterious mugger.

Predictably, I hadn’t found anyone. I was stuck there for maybe ten minutes, watching the frozen Oka River dotted with the dark figures of ice anglers and skiers and an occasional passerby on a winter stroll.

I was back by the monument on the dot — which was a good thing because Arts was already there, and she wasn’t alone. Next to her stood a pale young kid of about ten years old.

Chapter 29

WHAT DO YOU DO these days if you find yourself alone with a young child in the privacy of a deserted public park? You run for your life, that's what you do. The recent wave of pedohysteria that has flooded over our country makes such a scenario suspicious by default. *Where are you taking that child, mister? To the police, you say? You've found him standing all alone in the street? Are you sure you're not a predator yourself?* And no amount of reassurances will help you clear your name afterward. The least you can expect is a good thrashing for your trouble.

Having said that, that's exactly what I'd have done myself — in theory at least. I might have called the cops and made myself scarce before they arrived. Let them deal with it. *No good deed goes unpunished* is probably one of the most relevant sayings of our time. Because you can't safeguard yourself from some idiot asking you "If you saved the boy, what have you done with his hat?"[11]

Still, this scrawny teenager who never stopped coughing (now that I'd come closer I could see he was slightly older than I'd originally thought) looked down grimly, completely ignoring me. Like many childless males, I wasn't very good at striking up friendships with human beings under the age of fourteen. Still, it couldn't be helped. Arts had already disappeared somewhere saying she'd be back soon, leaving me alone with the boy.

"What's your name?

He looked up. "Ilya."

"I'm Sergei," I said, shaking his hand.

His handshake was weak, his hand slim and pale. Finally it dawned at me that he must have been very sick.

“How do you know Arts?” I asked.

“You mean Auntie Rita?”

“Yeah, sure. Sorry. I meant Auntie Rita.”

“She’s a friend of my Mom’s. Auntie Rita told me to come with her and not be surprised at whatever happened. She said she’d explain everything later.”

Oh great. This was one hell of an informative conversation. Then again, what did I expect? The kid’s name was Ilya. Arts — a. k. a. Rita — must have told him she was a friend of his Mom’s. Then again, she might have indeed known the boy’s mother.

As for his illness, I decided not to ask any questions. It was a bit personal, if you know what I mean.

“Are you all right, you two?” Arts asked, reappearing. “Not too frozen?”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Ilya, are you tired?”

“A little. How far do we need to go still?”

“We’re almost there. They’ve just called me. They’re expecting us. Let’s go.”

“Do you need any help?” I asked, trying to support him by the crook of his arm.

“No, I’m all right,” he rejected my offer calmly but firmly.

So that’s how we proceeded: unhurriedly, taking frequent breaks. Arts and myself walked in front and stopped now and again for quite a while, waiting for the boy to catch up.

We headed for one of the almost deserted side trails. I’d expected something of the sort; what I’d loved to have known was what a mugger would look like and who he was supposed to bring along.

“Aren’t you gonna ask me anything?” Arts finally said when we’d stopped for yet another pause.

“I am. What do you think about the price of the dollar in the stock market? I’m looking for opportunities to invest.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

“Well, the rest is probably personal, if I understand it rightly. It’s none of my business. It’s up to you to tell me.”

She nodded, regaining her silence. She didn’t last very long though. The next time we stopped, she continued while we were safely out of earshot of the boy.

“He’s my brother. We share the same biological father. When I became a Player, I... I faked my own death. One day you might realize that this makes it easier for everyone. I’d never had a mother: she died when I was born. And my father... Ilya, would you like to stop and take a break? To help you catch your breath?”

“I’m all right, Auntie Rita. Everything’s fine.”

Once again the two of us walked in front.

“When I ‘died’, my father took it badly, of course, but at the time I had an elder sister, two years my senior. So he just focused on her instead. After a while, she got married and moved to Bulgaria. That’s when my

father met Marina. A nice girl, much younger than him, although he wasn't that old, either. Basically, they just moved on. Then they had Ilya. I kept an eye on them from a distance. It's perfectly normal. Lots of Seekers do that. I couldn't approach them via my father anymore because no amount of Camouflage would have deceived him. It was hard for me as well. But I made a very good friend in Marina."

The kid drew level with us, wiped the sweat off his brow and gave us the thumbs-up, even though his entire countenance spoke volumes that he was about to flake out.

"He's grown, as you can see. Everything went well until..."

"What is it with him?"

"Leukemia. It's getting quite bad. He's already had one bone marrow transplant, and now he needs another one. But even an idiot can see that his chances are slim."

"That's why you decided to make him a Player?"

"Human illnesses are nothing for a Player," she said. "Once he becomes one, he'll soon be able to heal himself."

"Why can't you just cast some magic on him?"

"Do you know many restoration spells? Something to stop bleeding or restore health? I've even spoken to some Seekers who specialize in healing."

"And?"

"And nothing. It's just as complicated as my drawing. In order to heal a disease, you need to fully understand its nature. Secondly, you need to have a complete knowledge of how bone marrow works and what could

be wrong with it. In short, you need to be at least a medical student. And I might have even found an expert eventually, but time is an issue."

"Auntie Rita, is it far still?" the boy asked. He looked like death warmed up even though we hadn't walked very far.

"We're already there."

I looked about. We were in a deserted alley lined with gnarly leafless trees. The trail in the snow must have been cleaned at some point, but by now it was already completely covered over.

Two dark specks in the distance kept approaching, eventually turning into two figures.

Their manner was a bit strange. They staggered like two drunks supporting each other. But once they'd approached close enough, I could see that the shorter one of the two was walking against his will, "encouraged" by a burly orange-skinned Purg who pushed and kicked him into motion. Advancing in this manner, they came over to us and stopped about thirty feet away. The short one was an *Areometh*, the big one, a *Conjurer*.

Welcome to the funny farm, guys.

"Please! You don't understand!" the Areometh made a dash for us but struggled in the Conjurer's tight grip. "They were bad people! All of them! They did some awful things! And they would have continued doing them, had I not stopped them!"

"What's his development branch?" Arts asked, ignoring his pleas.

"There seems to be a little problem," the Conjurer cringed. "No matter how hard I tried to talk sense into him, he just refuses to speak. I could try again if it's not very urgent. I know a few ways of making people speak."

Hearing that, the Areometh shrank back. Apparently, he'd already gotten a dose of tough love from his captor. He was lucky that Arts was pressed for time — as lucky as a lab rat could be who'd escaped the lab table only to become a python's dinner.

"I'm afraid, time is something we haven't got," Arts snapped. "What a shame. Well, I suppose we'll have to take him as is."

"He's an Areometh," I said.

Immediately, three pairs of eyes were on me. With the exception of Ilya, of course, who showed no interest whatsoever in the mysterious appellation. He hadn't struck me as a very curious type, anyway. He just stood there kicking the snow with his boot.

Arts frowned, looking surprised. "That means he can obtain information about objects through tactile contact."

"Not just objects," the Areometh hastened to explain. "People too. And that's the most important! I can see right through them! All their thoughts, their actions and motives. You'd think they're holier-than-thou but they're all full of crap."

I gave him a closer look. He was a scruffy little runt, skinny as an autumn leaf, his eyes ablaze with madness. It's true that not all Players survived the temptation of their freshly-gained powers. There you were, living your regular life, and then all of a sudden you lost your marbles — or at least that's what it must have looked like to you. You're suddenly capable of seeing a new world, completely different from the one you've been living in. And not everybody can adapt to the new rules. Some — like the late Talsian or like this guy here — went completely bananas.

"If dirt is what you're looking for, you're bound to find it," I said.

“You two can talk all you want,” the Purg interrupted, “but me, I’d rather get the hell out of here and move my butt to some far-off tropical paradise on the other side of the Network to get the most out of your money.”

Arts chuckled. “And then you’re gonna come back and keep doing what you’re doing?”

He shrugged. “One man’s meat is another man’s poison. What’s with the money?”

“The other half, as promised,” Arts threw the money on the snow.

She had the dust packed in sturdy bags — not quite as big as potato sacks but not every cash courier would be able to lift all four of them. The Purg forced his prisoner onto the snow, stepped forward and picked up the money which promptly vanished into thin air.

“You’re a pleasure to do business with. Hunter wasn’t lying.”

I tensed. “Hunter?”

“Later,” Arts said.

“Okay, now the main part,” the Purg said, lifting his prisoner by the hair.

The molten snow ran down his face like blood. I shuddered.

“I could do it myself, of course, but still it would be better if the kid did it himself,” the mugger said. “That way he’d receive the bonus of a skill and a spell. A Divine Avatar is probably out of the question: the guy doesn’t look as if he has anything of the kind. So?”

“You,” Arts told him, standing between her brother and the other two.

At this point, the boy surprised me. The whole time, he'd acted as if he had nothing to do with what was happening. Now, however, he raised his head, looked at Arts and asked in a quiet voice,

"Is he gonna kill him?"

"Not at all," Arts lied. "He'll just make him give you something. It'll help you get better."

The Purg shrugged again. "Whatever."

A short curved knife appeared in his hand, the kind that butchers use to skin animals. He deftly moved the blade, leaving a rusty brown line on the criminal's throat, deep and deadly.

Wheezing and gurgling, the man grabbed at his throat but it was already too late. The snow under him had already turned crimson, greedily soaking up the blood. I gulped nervously. For some reason, I thought about Talsian yet again.

No idea how long it actually took — a few seconds or even a minute — but then it was all over. The dead man vanished as if he'd never even been here. The snow turned white again. The only thing that still reminded one of the prisoner's recent presence was a light dusting of ashes, the kind that forms when coals had completely burned away. But these, too, were dissipating quickly, as if the earth didn't want any part of him.

"I'll see you around!" the Purg shouted.

A long tentacle materialized out of nowhere and reached out for me. I jumped out of its way just in time, somersaulting and getting a good dose of snow down my collar. I drew my sword. The tentacle stood upright on the ground, defying all logic and common sense. More importantly, its intentions appeared to be quite aggressive.

I met its next lunge in a slightly more dignified manner. Crouching, I took a swing with my Katzbalger which uselessly sliced through the tentacle as if it were thin air. Suppressing my desire to dodge its next attack, I stood my ground. Strangely enough, the tentacle didn't do me any harm. What the hell?

"Him and his jokes," Arts said, turning back to me. "I told you he was a Conjurer. And a very good one, too."

"He must have done it to distract us from following him, to discourage any idea of catching up with him and getting our money back," I realized.

"Better safe than sorry," Ilya suddenly joined in the conversation.

"How do you feel?" Arts asked him.

"Very strange," the lad admitted. "I can see lines of text right before my eyes. And I have a weird feeling inside."

"You'll have to get used to it. Let's go. It's no good hanging around here. Sergei!"

I startled, realizing I was crouching just in front of the dead Player's remains. My fingertips were covered in his ashes, so fine that I suddenly remembered the chemical term for it: "solid aerosol". I sniffed at it but it was odorless. And with every passing second, it continued to disperse.

I rose to my feet. "Let's go."

We moved off all together, slower this time. Arts was supporting her brother by the shoulders while I walked next to them.

"Won't the guards be looking for him?" I asked.

“If they are, they won’t find anything. There’s already been a mission issued in Moscow to kill him. So no one’s gonna cry in their soup.”

“In that case, we might as well collect the reward,” I joked sadly.

She stared at me for a while, trying in vain to work out whether it was a joke or a serious proposal. “I’m not interested in making Ilya’s situation public. So I’d be perfectly happy if this Areometh guy simply disappeared. Let them carry on thinking he’s just laid low somewhere.”

“And that Purg of yours, you sure he won’t talk?”

“No, he won’t. Muggers don’t really like talking about their dealings. Those who do, don’t usually live very long — and they get fewer clients.”

“I just hope that Ilya’s okay with all this,” I said in a low voice.

“You don’t need to speak about me behind my back,” the lad said, turning his head. “I understand everything. Auntie Rita already told me that I would get better and become a Seeker. And that after that, the world might change. And she’s right: everything has already changed a little.”

I didn’t say anything. What was there left to say? Although he’d indeed become a Seeker, he would be forever locked in the body of a teenager. What would become of him after a few years — ten, or even a hundred, provided he lived that long? An experienced Player trapped in the body of a slender youth.

We reached the park’s exit where a car was already waiting for us — or rather, for Arts and the boy. Apparently, they hadn’t counted on me joining them. Arts told me as much, looking slightly embarrassed:

“We’re off to see Ilya’s parents. They think we’re out for a walk. And I need to explain to Ilya how to behave around them now, that sort of thing.”

I nodded and extended my hand to the boy. “Good luck. Stay bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Good-bye,” he said seriously.

His handshake was dramatically stronger now. Even though his sickness can’t have regressed so quickly, the process must have already started. Arts must have done the right thing. She’d hired a mugger to locate the wanted murderer, and had her brother initiated. She could have chosen any helpless newbie Player who would have become easy prey for the mugger, but she’d wanted a criminal. Which would explain the exorbitant price she’d paid.

She’d done everything perfectly rationally. In which case, why was I so consumed by doubt? This little accident in the park, to which I’d basically invited myself, had left me with a strange aftertaste. I wanted to wash myself clean and forget the whole thing without ever thinking about it again. And I really couldn’t explain what made me feel that way. Wouldn’t I have done the same for my own family?

In order to stop thinking these holier-than-thou thoughts, I switched to more practical matters. I pulled out my phone and searched the map for light fixture shops. There seemed to be one just close by but it was only open until 6 p.m. So this wasn’t an option. There was another one a couple of bus stops away, right on Gagarin Avenue.[12] It was closing in twenty minutes, giving me a slim chance of making it.

The cab flew down the streets devoid of any traffic, arriving in a mere five minutes. The shop was situated on the ground floor of a five-story building. The glitzy shop sign suggested the worst kind of shabby chic, and the shop assistants’ unhappy faces spoke volumes about their standard of service... or its lack thereof. I could understand them, actually: nobody wants to serve clients after hours. For that reason, I didn’t wish to prolong their agony: I just asked them to show me the cheapest ceiling lamps and chose one of them, a made-in-China affair with three lamps pointing down,

which cost me $40, as well as a set of energy-saving bulbs. It looked quite decent. I could easily have bought something prettier and more expensive — but somehow I doubted that my personal house exterminator would appreciate a $1,000 Egyptian cut-glass chandelier.

I called a cab. After another hour of staring out the car window at traffic jams stretching like bubblegum into the distance, I finally arrived home. I absolutely had to get myself a mount: a snapdrake or even a flyback. In these times of nanotechnologies, the string theory and the hadron collider, traffic jams were an absolute anachronism.

As I entered, I caught myself thinking that I was already getting used to all the mind-boggling aromas issuing from the kitchen. I'd developed a good appetite. Meaning, I was getting a bit too self-indulgent.

Bumpkin sprang out into the hallway and checked the lamp box with the curiosity of a child rummaging through her parents' supermarket bags. Once he'd realized that the box contained no foodstuffs and that the lamp wasn't going to add to his kitchen register, he dashed back into the kitchen with the same gusto.

Suppressing my stomach's complaints, I cut the power, fetched a stool and hung the lamp on the hook with the aid of my phone's torch. I connected it, stuffed all the wires under the ceiling rose, lifted the whole thing up and secured it. What a great shame that the only thing they teach you in shop class at school is how to build flippin' birdhouses when they should be teaching you the basics of plumbing and electricity. Had I not had my Granddaddy to teach me, I'd be now stuck sadly in a pitch-black room with a quality birdhouse for company.

"Bumpkin, did you know that a summer soup is supposed to be eaten in summer?" I asked as I sat down at the table.

"You asked for something fresh, so here you go," he said with a helpless gesture.

I wanted to grumble some more but shut up just in time. How in hell's name did he do that? This was a basic summer soup — made with kefir, of all things — and still he'd managed to make me lick my fingers. As soon as I'd emptied the plate, another one replaced it, with chicken Kiev this time. I did recognize the chicken part — while Bumpkin who'd adopted all the panache of a Michelin-star restaurateur, enlightened me as to its proper name.

As soon as I raised my fork in order to prove that the poor chicken hadn't died in vain, my cell rang. It could have been Julia: despite what she'd said about her being busy, she must have been missing me. But this was a strange number that wasn't listed in my phone.

I hesitated, thinking it was probably yet another cold call offering me a one-of-a-kind bank card offer or a new competitive phone tariff (whose only advantage was that you'd have to pay more for it in the end). Still, it wasn't the case. I heard a familiar voice, realizing there was no such thing as a coincidence.

"Good evening, Sergei."

"If you say so."

I heard a chuckle. "I can hear you recognized my voice."

"For sure, Max. Or is that not your real name?"

"Of course it isn't."

"So what do you want?"

"I don't want anything. It's my family. My father would like to speak to you. I hope you'll be prudent enough to agree and render this service to him. There's a lot at stake, including your own family's wellbeing."

I ground my teeth, suppressing a curse. “When?”

“Right away.”

“Where?”

“I’ll text you the address.”

He hung up. Furious, I slammed my fist down on the plate. The plate smashed. One of the chicken pieces dropped to the floor, another stuck itself flat to my hand. Bumpkin gasped and made himself scarce.

The phone vibrated. An address appeared on the screen. I’d have to calm down. Now it wasn’t just my life at stake. And then I’d have to think what to do about this stupid Archalus and his family.

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Chapter 30

WHATEVER YOU SAY, you can't get plums from a cactus. Often children unconsciously copy their parents' behavior without really stopping to think whether it's good or bad. So if you want to raise kids properly, you should start with yourself.

The father of the false "Max" was an Archalus. He was also much the worse for wear. He didn't seem to have any human virtues to speak of — and apparently, his son had taken after him.

Max's father looked as if he'd been around the block a few times. The tip of his left wing was deformed, the flight feathers of the right one appeared to have been charred a long time ago. Add to this a crooked nose and a scar on his lip, and the result was as far from a battle-weathered warrior as you can get. If anything, he looked like a thief who'd just been caught and gotten a good hiding.

Having said that, the tag above his head was a bit unsettling. It said: *Spy*. Who would have thought?

"Couldn't you have found a better place to meet?" I said, sweeping my hand around the place.

The bar was well and truly a commoners' domain, if you know what I mean. It had a small dance floor in the back where some rather outdated uptempo music was playing. The backsides of the tables were caked in gum. Heavy wooden chairs completed the interior design, together with so-called "intimate" diffused lighting and a brightly lit bar. Here, female patrons were all of a certain age, clad in all-too-revealing glittery dresses, and men had already entered their mid-life crises. Not the most respectable of places, if you asked me. It would never have been my choice for an RV.

“Please take a seat, Sergei. I’ve ordered you a beer. My name is Valfail. I chose a busy place like this just to make sure you don’t do anything you might later regret. My son and I have made some inquiries. As it turns out, you killed none other than the Destroyer God, and then you exterminated the great Talsian himself.”

I chuckled, making a mental note that his mention of Two-Face was rather contemptuous while he seemed to have referred to Talsian with a great deal of deference. “Who are you?”

“Just somebody who’s trying to find his place under the sun. I used to live in Elysium, I fought in Purgator, but everything in life comes to an end. I came here in search of peace. I married a local girl and had a son with her. Still, I never completely lost contact with my brothers. It was they who told me that just before the battle with the Kabirids, a half-blood human had come from Cesspit in order to pay the ransom for his pisshead Korl friend. He paid it not with money but with Devil’s Sulfur.”

The Archalus sipped his beer, set his mug back on the table and smacked his lips with satisfaction. I tasted mine just to fill in the pause. Well, I shouldn’t have. The beer was bitter and gave me the impression of having been tampered with.

“After the battle, a few more interesting details came to light. In the heat of that battle, one of the captains had accompanied both the man and his Korl friend to the Community. And how did they reward him? That’s right, with more sulfur. All this gave them the impression that the man in question had a lot of that particular ingredient so valued by the Archali. Some of them even tried to look for him but unfortunately, he’s never been seen in Purgator since. So that got me thinking. If this half-blood human came from Cesspit, it stood to reason he’d go back there. But how do you find an ear of wheat in a haystack?”

I paused, trying to work out which one of the two annoyed me the most: the old Archalus with his broken wing or his offspring. In the end, I

decided it was the former. The so-called “Max” was only a sidekick, but the mastermind of this little outfit was sitting right in front of me.

“I did so by locating his Korl friend, the one he’d come to rescue. But in order to locate him, I first had to search for the right city in Cesspit. Luckily, I got talking with yet another pisshead, an Archalus, who told me that he’d recently taken a half-blood who fit the description to Lutum. According to him, said half-blood came from Sorrow. And can you guess who was the first person we bumped into the moment we arrived? It was *Trowg*! How lucky was that?”

Kaf! Just wait till I find you, and I’ll strangle you with my bare hands! Still, I didn’t blow my cool; I even corrected the smug bastard:

“His name’s Traug, not Trowg.”

“Sorry. Traug it is. It didn’t take me long to locate the individual I’d been looking for. I followed him — or you, rather, — and found out where you lived. You’d be surprised how far a bit of baksheesh can take you these days. After all this time spent among humans, some of their customs rub off on you. Very soon I knew the name of the person who lived in that apartment. After a bit more digging, I found out all I needed to know about your whole family. Although Darya is still very young by local standards, Lily was a perfect fit. My son played his part impeccably, so well that very soon your sister wanted to introduce him to the family.”

He must have noticed me clenching my fists because he hurried to add,

“Please don’t overreact. This place is full of commoners.”

“And what if I do? I could always kill you, I suppose, and then do away with your son. Then I’d just sit it out in Purgator.”

“What, and leave your family behind? And your lifestyle?” he asked in a distinctly trembling voice. He could say what he wanted but this devil

— oops, sorry, this “angel” — was clearly afraid of me.

“Okay. What is it you want?”

“Nothing really. Like, thirty grams of sulfur? Because you see, my son here has a problem. He really wants to become a Seeker. Which doesn’t come cheap. I know some good vendors who deal in sulfur. I don’t think it’ll be so difficult for you to find some. Otherwise, you know... anything could happen.”

My hand reached for the knife of its own accord. Still, I forced myself to stop. Don’t get me wrong: I was dying to bury my blade right between his eyes just to wipe the smug grin off his face. But he had a point: doing so right there and then would mean immediate banishment. Or something even worse. What a strange character: he was visibly afraid of me but still trying to lay down terms. He must have been really desperate.

“What’s gonna happen once I’ve brought you the sulfur?”

I purposefully hadn’t said “if”. I wanted to throw him off guard and make him believe things were going to plan. Otherwise, he’d be too unpredictable, trying to play it safe. Naturally, I had no intention of complying with his demands. You don’t negotiate with blackmailers, as simple as that. Because if he sensed any kind of weakness in me, he would start tugging at the leash whenever he had an opportunity. Now all I had to do was decide how to get rid of this pair of idiots with the minimum amount of hassle.

“We’ll disappear,” he replied, “and leave you and your family alone. Your sister might be upset for a while, but at her age, the pangs of a lost love can only do her good, don’t you think?”

I cast a glance at “Max” who was openly ogling the aging women on the dance floor, eyeing them with badly concealed lust and some sort of... of longing? Of course he was young, but still he gave me the impression he was suffering from a bad case of blue balls.

“It might take some time,” I said. “There’s no more left where I got it from the last time. I need to rob another grave. That’ll take a while.”

He all but jumped on the spot, his eyes sparkling like those of an alcoholic at the sight of a bottle. “How long?”

I had a funny feeling that his son’s initiation was only an excuse. I could bet my bottom dollar his daddy had his own plans regarding the precious ingredient.

“A week,” I said. “That should be enough.”

“If you say so. I’m happy we could come to this arrangement.”

He stuck his hand out but I ignored it. He wasn’t worth it. He was visibly embarrassed but tried not to show it. With a fake stumble, I clambered to my feet, “accidentally” shoving his son aside. The fake Max ouched as he recoiled.

“How do I contact you?” I asked before I left.

“You should have my son’s phone number in your phone’s memory. Just give him a call.”

I nodded and left. Naturally, I had no intention of procuring sulfur for that blockhead. It’s just that a week should be plenty of time for me to work out what to do about those two. Something bad enough to hopefully cause them some physical damage.

I strolled pensively along the street until I came to an empty shop front. I could see two Middle-Eastern migrant workers busy lugging sheets of plasterboard inside.

That’s when I had a brainwave. Could it really be so simple?

I pulled out my phone and dialed Arts. Luckily, she was within range. Even more luckily, she picked it up after the third ring.

“Hi, can you speak?”

“Sure. Is it urgent?”

“Sort of. How did you contact that guy, Conjurer? Do you still have his number?”

“It’s not so easy. You wouldn’t believe it but he asked me to *page* him, of all things. Then he’d get back to me. It was a different number every time.”

“*Page* you?” I asked, refusing to believe it. “Do pagers still exist?”

“Absolutely.”

“In that case, could you please give me the number?”

“Hang on.”

I waited in front of the empty shop window all but dancing in place with impatience, which in the end drew the attention of the two migrant workers. So I left and carried on toward the bus stop. After about thirty seconds, I received the number I needed.

Okay, let’s try it.

I dialed the paging service operator, still worried that it might be some kind of ripoff. Really, who was still using pagers these days?

“Hi, this is Informex Service. My name’s Tatiana, how can I help you?”

“Hi, Tatiana. Can I leave a message with you?”

As I said it, I felt like a complete idiot. Still, the girl seemed to have perked up. “Could you please give me the number and the message?”

“It’s 3491. Message: *I have a business proposal for you*. Signed: *Hunter’s student*.”

“Excuse me? Did you say ‘hunter’?”

“That’s right,” I said, unwilling to satisfy her curiosity.

“Thanks for using Informex.”

“Thank *you*,” I hung up.

Now all I had to do was wait. The only question that remained was whether the Conjurer would be interested in somebody like me. Logically, he should be. As far as I’d gathered, he knew Hunter; he must have also known that he’d recently taken on a new student. He might even think that it had been Hunter that had given me his number.

The uncertainty didn’t last long. I received a new system message immediately followed by my phone’s ringtone.

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 16.

“Hi Conjurer. I’m sorry I don’t know your real name.”

“Do we know each other?”

“We met earlier today in the park.”

“You’re the Seeker who was with Arts,” he said. “Are you really Hunter’s student?”

“I am indeed. I have some business to discuss with you.”

“If you mean that little illusion, then I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it...”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to discuss. That was one hell of a tentacle. I really loved it. I’d like to hire you.”

“Oh. Actually, I already have some plans.”

“I know! You wanted to get the hell out of here and move to some far-off tropical paradise on the other side of the Network to get the most out of our money.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, how about you stay for a few days longer than planned but in that case, you’ll have a bit more money to burn?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’d like you to create a believable illusion of a certain place in every detail, so good you can’t tell it from the real thing.”

“Is that all?” he sounded disappointed.

“Yes, that’s all. No need to kill or kidnap anyone.”

“Okay. That’ll be two kilos.”

“You’re not serious, are you? Half a kilo will do it. It’s not as if you have to do much.”

“Are you suggesting I spend several more days in this shithole for a measly half a kilo?”

“Okay, one kilo. But not a gram more.”

“Very well. I’ll do it, but only out of respect for Hunter.”

Your Bargaining skill has increased to level 5.

“I’ll call you soon with all the details.”

I wouldn’t have said that this conversation had improved my mood but at least it had given me some sense of closure. Were his services worth the price of a second-hand BMW? Probably not. Was my family’s security worth that much? Absolutely. It was a no-brainer.

I stumbled back home feeling dog-tired, clutching two clinking beer bottles. I was in no mood to read or even eat; all I wanted was to get spaced out in anticipation of meeting the Horseman. Bumpkin was busy cleaning the floors looking remarkably cheerful, humming some old-fashioned tune. I removed my boots, peeled off the trench coat and tiptoed into my room. Despite the divine smells coming from the kitchen, I didn’t feel at all hungry.

I turned the TV on, opened a beer and texted Julia. By the time I was done with the first bottle, she’d texted back, wishing me good night, just as yet another brainless talk show began.

I reached for the remote to zap it and froze.

A tiny beady-eyed creature covered in brown fur was looking up at me from the floor. Its head was the size of my thumb. You’d think it was tiny but by then, I’d already jumped up onto the armchair.

“Bumpkin!” I wailed like a Banshee.

The goblin arrived. He looked at me, then at the mouse, but wasn’t in a hurry to get rid of it. On the contrary, he picked it up and began stroking it.

“What’s this?” I asked without taking my eyes off our furry visitor.

“It’s a mouse. It wasn’t easy to find one! I had to go down to the basement to get it. There’s so much junk down there you can’t imagine! Rusty bikes, strollers, all sorts of old stuff. And it’s all under lock and key as if someone might be tempted to steal it!”

“Bumpkiiiin! Where did you get the mouse from?”

“That’s what I’m telling you! I saw some mouse droppings down there but it wasn’t easy to catch one! Still, I got you a couple, look! A boy and a girl. This one is a boy. He’s so quick, you should see him run.”

“*Bumpkin!*”

The new lamp clinked its protest at my thunderous voice.

“What the hell is it doing here?”

“What do you mean?” the goblin sounded sincerely surprised. “A household without mice is a poor, miserable place. It means there isn’t enough food to go round. You might be a bit weird but you’re a good master, I have to admit. Okay, so you don’t have a house of your own yet, only this apartment, but it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have mice! What’s the point of having a cat, then?”

“Which cat?”

“I met one in the street the other day, he might be a good choice. A big brute of a thing. All he needs is a good wash and something for fleas. He’s one hell of a fleabag!”

“We’re not taking anything else on, okay? No cockroaches, not even a centipede! Now would you please take this rodent to where you found him! And his girlfriend! Is that clear?”

“Yeah,” he grumbled, then vanished together with the mouse.

I heard the bathroom door slam, followed by silence. It didn't last long though. After a brief while, Bumpkin reappeared before me.

"Are you serious about the cat?" he asked, frowning.

I gave him a stern look. "Bumpkin, just don't start, okay? I have my hands full with you as it is already. Any more domestic animals would be a bit over the top."

"It's just that your house is so sad and quiet. At least my old master had a radio which played all kinds of songs."

How were you supposed to get angry with him? With a grin, I reached for another beer. I gulped it down in one go — whether due to all the stress or just because I was thirsty. This almost atomic energy of his might need pacifying before I came home one day to discover a pig in my bathroom being fattened up for Christmas, or a bunch of hens brooding in a kitchen cupboard.

I booted up my laptop, checked a technical goods site and located a cheap plug-in radio which was only 700 rubles[13]. I rummaged through my wallet for my credit card which I hadn't used in quite a while. Bingo! I still had 1,500 rubles on it. I ordered the radio to be delivered.

"Bumpkin!" I shouted. "Tomorrow they'll bring you a radio. When they ring at the door, just shapeshift into me, answer the door and sign for it."

"No way?!"

His voice came from directly above me. He dropped onto my neck and gave me a cuddle. His bristling hair got up my nose, so I did my best to give his friendly hugs a miss.

“Bah! Bumpkin, you honk of the basement! Enough of this already! Go take a shower! Just make sure you don’t bung up the pipes again.”

“Don’t worry, I saw how you unblocked them,” he replied with such confidence that I got seriously worried he might flood the place out again.

My day ended late. By then, even my apparently deaf neighbor had already turned off his blazing TV and the motion sensor lamp under my window had gone out. The courtyard was quiet now: this kind of weather wasn’t clement for outdoor entertainment. Finally, the snow came bucketing down. I lay in the dark, just thinking about everything and nothing. I didn’t even notice myself dozing off. That’s why I believed everything that happened afterward to be reality.

I was standing on one side of a busy wide street packed with traffic. People were walking past without even noticing me: all of them commoners hurrying about their own apparently important business. Still, it wasn’t them who attracted my attention.

Three men stood on the opposite side of the road: three Seekers, their faces concealed by hoods.

Instinctively — either through Intuition or just some gut feeling — I knew I had to join them. But how was I supposed to do that? The road was so busy that there was no way I could cross it. There were no traffic lights or pedestrian crossings anywhere in sight. And the three Seekers didn’t look as if they were going to wait forever for me to get my act together.

I stepped forward, only to be rammed by a yellow cab. It hit my leg, threw me onto the hood and then down onto the road.

As I lay on the tarmac, I realized that I could actually wind back time. Still, my ability didn’t work.

“Are you all right?”

I felt somebody’s hands help me to my feet. Apparently, it was the cab driver.

“I’m okay,” I tried to focus my blurred vision on his face. Everything was swimming in front of me, all I could see was a big white spot hovering before me.

A white spot?

The realization struck me too late. My vision came back into focus a mere second before he hit me. It was Morbian standing in front of me: slightly worse for wear but happy in a bloodthirsty way. His grin turned into a grimace, his face becoming a black waxen mask. The Dark Avatar.

Then I realized that the cab wasn’t a cab at all: it was an enormous snapdrake carrying a large bundle on its back. All this had taken me a split second to take in.

“It won’t take long,” the masked Morbian said, burying his fist in my chest.

I woke up gasping for breath like a winded boxer. It felt as if I’d actually been punched in the solar plexus. I ran my hand over my sweat-drenched hair, wiped the perspiration from my temples and peered out the window where a scarlet dawn was breaking, cold and uncaring. It knew that today two Seekers would be locked in mortal combat — but it didn’t seem to give a damn.

Once I’d regained my breath, I calmed down, picked up my phone and dialed Arts.

“Yes?” her sleepy unhappy voice demanded. “What’s up?”

“It’s today.”

“What’s today?”

“It’s gonna happen today. Morbian is already quite close. I know now where he’s gonna come from. I want you to listen carefully. This is what you need to do.”

“I’m listening,” she replied, immediately wide awake.

I took the next five minutes to unhurriedly explain to her everything she had to do — without actually revealing all of my plan to her.

Chapter 31

THE MORNING IS HARDLY a prerequisite of a good mood. Especially in winter, when you have to get ready for work in the dark, fry a few eggs and drink a boiling-hot, sickly-sweet cup of tea or instant coffee, moving on autopilot because your mind just refuses point blank to wake up. You turn the TV on, only to see the same old grim news anchors forcing a semblance of a smile as they wish you a “good morning”.

My day began anxiously with this half-prophetic dream. Still, by the time I sat in my kitchen just in my boxers, I was already in a relatively good mood. The yolks in my eggs were nice and sloshy and the whites themselves well done. Together with a few slices of ham, it all went down great. I wasn’t at all scared or panicky about meeting the Horseman; just a bit jittery like a substitute player coming on in a football match. It wasn’t that hard to overcome.

I made myself look presentable, brushed my unkempt hair — it was high time I did something about it, — and got dressed. Then I checked my entire inventory, weighing up the most important weapons I intended to use in the upcoming battle.

Just as I walked out the door, I remembered Hunter and our regular morning sessions. I pulled out my phone and typed in a quick message, telling him I wouldn’t be able to come.

The answer arrived almost straight away:

Very well. Good luck.

I chuckled. Talk about keeping a secret that every barber knows! On the other hand, I would have been surprised if Hunter hadn’t known about it.

I dropped a quick “Bye” to Bumpkin and left. I’d already decided not to upset him or make him anxious about the day’s events.

The morning was remarkably sunny and warm. The city was gradually coming back to life after last night’s snowstorm. Street cleaners were scrubbing pavements with their shovels, snow-cleaning machines moved slowly along; schoolkids were throwing snowballs. Recently, I’d been constantly in a hurry, rushing around in cabs, too impatient to resolve all sorts of problems and find all sorts of answers; but today I wanted to take a leisurely stroll to the bus stop. I still had loads of time before seeing Arts.

I pulled a bundle of earbuds out of my pocket and unwound them, then pressed the Play button, setting it to Random, and clicked on the next song. It turned out to be *The World Ain't Slowin' Down* by Ellis Paul. Good choice. I even smiled, repeating after the singer: “You gotta get gone, you gotta get going”...

Professor walked past, his tipsy arm draped around a plumber I knew. The two must have been heading for yet another “symposium”. Uncle Zaur waved to me from his little kebab joint by the crossroads, standing in the doorway cigarette in hand. Even the saleswoman from the corner shop gave me a long angry look, apparently trying to figure out where she’d seen my face before.

At which point I broke into a run seeing the bus I needed approaching the stop. I made it just in time; I paid and took a seat.

By then, my earbuds were buzzing with the sweet strains of Patti Page singing about the raindrops falling on her head as the snowed-in sunlit city flashed past the window. The bus was half-empty, the streets deserted. It was a weekend, wasn’t it? Everybody was sleeping in before embarking on the mandatory shopping trip, followed by strolls in the park and trips to the skating rink.

It felt so nice and peaceful here. They could say what they wanted about Cesspit being the asshole of the universe but it was one hell of a good place. I really didn't want to die.

I noticed Arts through the bus window. Clever girl. She'd taken a place by the door even though it meant that she had to stretch her neck just to see out of the high café windows.

The café — or restaurant as it proudly announced itself — had been chosen for a reason. It was situated on Heroes Avenue, just next to Moscow Highway and only a stone's throw away from Burnakov Drive which we might have to use as an escape route.

From last night's conversation with Arts I'd found out that both the Order of Drivers and their flyback stables were situated on the airport's grounds. Which was quite handy really because commoners perceived any mounts taking off as airplanes. That's where Morbian was supposed to arrive from (first by flyback and then by snapdrake). And that's exactly where Arts must have been today, judging by her beautiful proud mount which was lying by the roadside only a few yards away from the café entrance.

"You're a beauty," I said, stroking the animal's neck. "Still, you'd better stealth up. You do understand me, don't you?"

The creature snorted, shook his head and began to vanish before my very eyes.

I took out the true mirror just to check out what exactly the commoners could see: an empty roadside or some kind of creature instead. A bog-standard Skoda was parked up in his place. Did that mean that invisibility was something only Seekers could use? How interesting.

The café — or restaurant — had only one room. Its columns were inlaid with decorative stones, heavy burgundy drapes lined with lacy

undercurtains, and two fake crystal chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling.

Arts was sitting on a leather-covered bench with her elbows up on a little square table. Unsurprisingly, we seemed to be the only customers: it was too early for lunch and indecently early for the happy hour, so Arts was nursing a cup of espresso.

“A glass of your best unfiltered draught beer,” I said to a waiter who materialized next to me.

Arts gave me a disdainful look. The waiter, however, didn’t show any reaction, probably thinking I was just yet another hungover patron on the mend. Then again, if you remembered how commoners viewed me, a bottle of vodka could easily kill someone of my seemingly puny appearance, and a few beers could do me some serious damage.

“I always dreamed of starting the day with a beer,” I said.

“As long as you don’t end it in the gutter.”

“That entirely depends on a certain horseman we both know. Have you brought what I asked you to?”

“Sure. A powerful stun spell like you want requires an Eh’rgh rune. Here, take a look.”

She produced an elongated flat rock with sharp edges. I could make out some writings — or maybe pictograms — covering its surface but I couldn’t quite figure out what it was. I didn’t dare take it from her — you never know with these things, it just might explode or something. It’s better to ask first.

“How does it work?”

“You show me the right place, and I’ll install it there myself. It works on any Player whatsoever. The moment he steps on it, it’s gonna blow sky high. It’s perfectly safe for commoners. The only problem is, I’m not sure whether it can kill Morbian, or even do him any serious damage.”

“That’s not what we want. We just need it to go off, that’s all. I’d like you to set it up right by the entrance to this ‘respectable’ joint.”

She nodded and walked out of the café. The waiter followed her with some suspicion, to which I replied as nonchalantly as I could,

“She’s just gone for a smoke.”

I peered out the window, watching what she was doing. Admittedly, I was curious. I couldn’t see much from where I was: I had to really crane my neck in order to catch anything.

Arts passed her hand over the rock, resembling an experienced UFOlogist trying to divine the information encrypted in an alien artifact. She crouched and did the same to the café’s front door step. Then she discarded the rock and came back inside.

“So how can a Stun rune help us defeat Morbian?” she asked.

“It won’t help us defeat him, no. But what it’ll do, it’ll make him really pissed. We could have gone directly to the place we’d chosen, but that way he’d know straight away that it was a setup. And there’s no knowing what he might do then. What I really want is for him to follow us wherever we take him, without any hesitation or doubt. And the only way I see to make him do that is by making him really angry.”

“Okay. But why here, of all places?” Arts swept her hand around the café as if doubting my choice.

“Easy. Morbian is going to arrive on a flyback. Then he’ll hire a snapdrake and rush headlong to meet me, using the information he’s

gleaned from the Grand Master.”

“Can’t he just use the Gates?”

“He could. But he won’t. Not because the Gatekeepers would mind so much. They don’t give a damn. But community guards might want to have a word with him. I don’t really know which side packs a better punch — but he won’t want to risk it, that’s for sure. The first time we met him he was riding a flyback, remember? That’s why I’m pretty sure he’s gonna do the same now. Although I can’t really tell which route he’s gonna take, I’d probably bet on him taking Lenin Avenue first, from where he’ll turn off into Komsomol Highway. But that’s really not important.”

“What is, then?”

“Just that he gets here. This place is far enough away from Players’ usual routes. Which is exactly why the rune trap won’t spring prematurely. And secondly, here we have a perfect escape route, following Burnakov Drive to Sormovo Route. And then it’s all down to us.”

“You still haven’t told me quite how you’re gonna kill him. Making a lion angry is a great idea, provided you’ve got a gun in your hand. Have we got one?”

I smiled. “Not a gun, no. A grenade.”

She didn’t get the chance to ask me anything else, just opened her eyes wide and pointed out the window. I turned to take a look, belatedly regretting not having finished my beer. Trust the Horseman to ruin our pleasant morning in the café.

My earlier dream had proven to be almost perfectly correct. Morbian was sitting proudly astride a panting snapdrake. Behind him, the unconscious body of a Seer dangled from the saddle, bound hand and foot. A stupid and highly inappropriate thought flashed through my head: I

wondered what the victim looked like through commoners' eyes and whether they could see him at all.

The Horseman looked regally impressive, reminding me of Thranduil from the books of the great Tolkien. His cold regular features betrayed no emotion; his watchful prickly gaze filled every onlooker with dread. His lean sinewy body was so precise in its movements as if he were a coiled spring about to unwind.

He dismounted unhurriedly, walked over to check on the Grand Master lying listlessly across the saddle, then returned to his snapdrake and looked him in the eye without saying a word. The snapdrake shook his head as if nodding his agreement.

"He's a Tamer," Arts whispered.

I might have asked her what it was supposed to mean but my tongue felt frozen, refusing to cooperate. Because at that very moment, Morbian was looking directly at me, right into my eyes.

I didn't like his smile.

Arts pulled my hand down. "He's gonna enter now."

"It's time, then," I took some money out of my wallet.

By now, the waiter couldn't take his eyes off us. I waved the bill in the air, then put it down on the table and placed my beer mug on it. I then forced myself to my feet even though everything within me screamed out for me to duck and promptly waddle over to the back door while I still could. Arts too looked as if she would love to part company with Morbian as quickly and safely as possible.

No such luck.

I cast two Mantles on myself, knowing they would be highly inadequate. Then I took a deep breath and walked over to the front door. By then, the Horseman was already a few mere paces away. All that stood between us was a flimsy white-plastic shop door. I could make out his grinning face through the double glazing as he reached for the door handle and took yet another step.

Strangely enough, there was no explosion. Morbian was just thrown up into the air like a rag doll. As he flew, I watched his protection sphere crumble into a shower of yellow flashes. This must have been some magic analog of my Mantle. And once he crashed down onto the road, I saw blue sparks flying off him.

“Arts — now!”

We must have looked like a bobsleigh team once they’d fully accelerated and were now hurrying to take their places in the sleigh. The only difference being, we had our snapdrake instead. The poor creature was so scared he’d even unstealthed, becoming perfectly visible. I leapt into the saddle, winding the reins around my hand, while Arts clung to my back lacing her arms around the place where my waist should have been.

I turned around one last time to check on Morbian. Cars were stopping all around him as helpful motorists rushed to administer first aid. Morbian was slowly coming round. He heaved himself up onto his elbow, looking around blurrily. I paused, waiting for him to catch sight of us, then dug my heels into my snapdrake’s shiny black flanks.

The race had begun.

I moved in an energetic trot past all the cars, catching the drivers’ surprised stares. Of course. Even in this warmup mode, my snapdrake could beat any SUV hands down. It must have felt really embarrassing to be overtaken by a battered old Skoda as if you didn’t move at all. And that was with me trying to rein the beast in. We didn’t want Morbian to lose us before we wanted him to.

After a brief while, he finally caught up with us. His face was distorted with fury even though he didn’t look as if he’d come to any serious harm. The only thing that had suffered when the rune had gone off was his ego — but that was well enough to make him want to flatten us into the tarmac.

As soon as I saw him, I spurred my snapdrake on. The cars around us had now turned into blurred lines, as did the traffic lights in our way. The road in front of us was reduced to a series of white markings which my mount expertly navigated to undertake any slower cars only to return to the fast lane.

The chase filled me with adrenaline even though I realized that Morbian would never be able to catch up with me, provided he didn’t cheat. His own snapdrake had already traveled all the way from the airport. It might not sound like a great distance but he’d already broken into a sweat while our own mount was just warming up.

Underground stations kept flashing past as if they were mere dozens of yards apart. Our snapdrake took the traffic jam before the 50th Anniversary of V-Day Street in one powerful leap, ignoring the streetcars’ indignant clanging at the vehicles blocking their way. The endless rows of nine-story blocks of flats flashed past like one solid gray wall.

In less than a minute, we’d already reached Comintern Street. We cleared it in what felt like a few giant leaps and bounds, finally escaping into Freedom Street. I gulped nervously, trying to dispel the lump in my throat. We were getting ever closer.

Finally, Khalzovskaya Street. Now we had to look really hard in order not to miss the right turn. There it was, past the overhead yellow gas pipe. The gardens of the machine-building plant were still far ahead to our right. To our left lay the Koposovo Oakwood nature reserve where everything should come to a head.

After a short while, I reined my snapdrake in and jumped onto the snow-laden tarmac. The snow-cleaning equipment had never made it this far. I offered a helping hand to Arts.

“Where to now?” she asked.

“Over there,” I pointed at a clump of bare trees.

Those last few dozen yards proved to be the hardest. We immediately sank deep into the snow forcing us to lift our knees high as we walked, just like in a PE class, while taking constant looks back to make sure our enemy hadn’t yet arrived.

We’d just managed to take cover behind the trees lining a small lake when we heard a thunderous explosion. The ground literally opened up behind us.

Morbian lowered the hand with which he’d cast the spell and jumped off his snapdrake.

For some reason, I felt terribly sorry for the Grand Master. Was he okay? The ride must have really shaken him up. There you go, this was my misplaced humanism kicking in again.

If you asked me, the Horseman must have had deadlier things in his arsenal than just making a hole in the ground. In any case, he stopped bombarding the winter-bound forest and followed our tracks. It might be his sadistic urge to watch his victims suffer. Or it could be a murderer’s desire to make sure his prey was dead. I couldn’t really tell.

In any case, we had to get out of here pronto because apparently, the Horseman had no intention of trudging through the snow. A fiery aura formed around him, making the snow in his path sizzle and thaw.

That gave us a good excuse to go even further. Morbian seemed to have little or no knowledge of our world’s physics because he seemed to

have forgotten about all the steam which had formed in place of the molten snow. That at least gave us a decent chance of escaping. However, it might not last.

“Do you see that lake over there?” I pointed at an elongated frozen pond.

“What about it?” Arts asked without taking her eyes off the vague silhouette of our Horseman of the Steamy Apocalypse.

“I want you to cast the most powerful thing you have. We need to break the ice.”

That was Arts’ biggest and most valuable forte in battle: she didn’t question an order. She just gave me a long look. “That’ll take most of my mana.”

“You won’t need it, anyway.”

With a curt nod, she raised her hands up to the sky. I very nearly joked, “*Let’s see how your pagan gods help you now, you heretic*,” but promptly reconsidered. What’s with all the stupid reckless thoughts at a moment like this? Could it be my brain trying to safeguard my poor mind from panicking by offering it stupid things to think of? Possible. In which case, I really should be careful not to let slip anything I might regret later.

In any case, it looked like the ancient pagan gods must have heard Arts’ plea. An enormous boulder — half the size of myself — dropped from above into the frozen lake, followed by several more. By the time she lowered her hands in exhaustion, the whole part of the lake nearest to us was covered in floating sheets of ice.

“A Meteor Shower,” she gasped weakly.

“I know what you mean. I had it too when I had a kidney stone problem,” I blabbed incoherently, unable to restrain my overwrought

nerves. “Give me your hand. Whatever happens, don’t let it go.”

She laid her warm hand in mine. I closed my eyes and stepped onto the lake’s surface. I was already used to the fact that the Game canceled out all the conventions of the ordinary world. And still I felt quite scared.

As it turned out, I shouldn’t have been. I was standing with one foot on the water. It seemed to hold me up quite well. I moved the other foot to join it. It worked.

“Are you sure I won’t drown?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“How do you know?”

“Just a gut feeling.”

Warily she lowered one snow-covered boot onto a gap between two floating clumps of ice and gave me a look of childish delight. Hah! Talk about easily pleased. A couple of quick miracles from up one’s sleeve were enough to keep her happy.

“Let’s go,” I said, because our self-appointed snow melting machine Morbian-1 was already drawing near.

For a while, we walked quite warily but once we felt secure enough, we broke into a run — admittedly unhurriedly, trying to step onto the seams where the ice was tearing itself apart, trying not to slip and fall. I wasn’t especially good at the “slip and fall” part but luckily, the one time when I did fall I didn’t let go of Arts’ hand.

I’d already noticed a small opening in the forest, closed in from above by a canopy of bare branches. Once we finally reached it, I dropped to my knees, gasping, and took a look around.

Great. It was a small misshapen glade of about 400 square foot, hemmed in by low bushes. A couple of trees offered good cover. This was as perfect as it could get.

“Now what?” Arts asked.

“Morbian will now have to take a detour around the lake. He can’t walk on water, can he? And once he gets here,” I pointed at the opposite side of the glade, “the show will begin. Now I want that grenade of yours, please.”

Chapter 32

IN OUR SOCIETY, commending people just isn't considered good form. If an author writes a good book, everybody believes it normal to leave a bunch of lukewarm reviews in the vein of, "good enough to read while you commute". And if you watch a great movie deserving all the praise under the sun, all you can manage is a skimpy "it's okay".

Personally, I think I have an answer to this. Russians by their very nature are afraid of "jinxing it". They're really unwilling to indulge in any kind of hype for fear of the thing not living up to their expectations. Just think that only a few minutes ago I'd praised Arts' quick thinking, and now she was really slow on the uptake.

She pretended she didn't know what I was talking about, flapping her pretty eyelashes as if implying she had nothing to do with the grenade in question. I even thought she was trying to come up with an excuse, like she'd run out of them or that those she had weren't the right type for my purposes. Or that she'd had to sell her entire stock to some guy just before she'd left to meet up with me.

Apparently, I was wrong in my insinuations. She was just giving it some thought.

"Which one do you prefer?" she finally asked.

"Why, do you have a choice?"

"I have two. One for attack and the other for defense. But the defense one has one hell of a strike range. Big enough to hurt you as well."

"See how easy it is? We only had to put our minds together to come up with a solution."

“Okay.”

She reached into her bag and produced an oval-shaped grenade. It didn’t look anything special: two hemispheres, a tube and a pin. Only when you held it in your hand did you realize how powerful it really was. Which was exactly what I tried to do, reaching out for it and getting a slap on the wrists for my trouble.

“Get your mitts off! I’ll keep it with me for the time being.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your war. Just give it to me.”

“You don’t know how to use it. All you’ll do is drop it at your own feet.”

“Hey, I’m not that ham-fisted. I know that you need to pull the pin out and then throw it. You’d better take cover. He’s not looking for you.”

“*Pull the pin out*!” she mocked me. ‘Show me. I want to see how you’re gonna lob it.”

“Arts, we don’t have the time!”

“Show me. Over there,” she pointed at a bush about sixty feet away.

I picked up a rock, tossing it up a few times in one hand to get used to its weight, then hurled it at the target. It wasn’t a particularly good effort. When I’d been conscripted, I’d done a much better job: despite my modest physique, I’d managed to hit the target every time. And now I was a good fifteen feet short of it.

“See what I mean?” Arts said. “You’re out of practice. You need to make sure it rolls off your fingertips. And you need to put one leg forward for support.”

“Oh, come on. It’s gonna be fine. Just tell me what I should do.”

“You should tell me your plan because I’m not going anywhere. I owe you money, don’t forget. Plus I promised to save you at least three times.”

“All right,” I said, casting anxious looks at the lake.

How do you explain a brilliant plan in a nutshell? This might actually be a good catchphrase for a lifestyle coaching course (seeing as these days you didn’t need a diploma or even basic education to claim the expertise). That would be a true golden goose! But the real reason I had to be brief was currently flying over the lake, rapidly approaching in our direction.

If I’d thought that breaking the ice might delay him, I’d been wrong all along. He’d simply used yet another awesome spell which was probably called Flight, judging by the Superman style of his advance. The only thing missing was that he wasn’t wearing his underpants on the outside. With his white hair slicked down by the wind, he resembled an ancient god — some kind of Cthulhu’s third cousin twice removed.

To tell you the truth, I was just putting on a brave face. The whole scene was quite ominous.

Morbian landed on the very edge of the glade and immediately saw the grenade in Arts’ clenched hand. He must have known what it was, or maybe he’d just guessed.

One thing he didn’t notice was the item I was clutching. It was too small to attract any attention, even with his Observation Skills.

“So you two have decided to drag it out?”

He wasn’t in a hurry to crush us to dust. Apparently, he had nothing else planned for today.

“I suppose so,” I said. “Mutual consent just doesn’t turn me on.”

“Very well,” he spread his arms wide, provoking me into action. A cheeky smile flitted across his face, making him resemble a cat who’d cornered a mouse but wasn’t yet in a hurry to kill it. He was taking his time playing with it until he got bored.

“Well, you asked for it,” I said.

It didn’t take me long to decide on a spell. Both Ice Flourish and Electric Arc were single-use. Morbian, however, was layered like an onion in protection shields.

I stretched out my hand palm up and clenched a fist, forming the Bloody Whip. Then I lashed out at him, sending the shimmering yellow shells of protection shields floating to the ground.

I didn’t pause to wonder whether I could remove them all. Nor did I panic about not making it. I just kept going at him without taking a single breather. By the time the spell had expired, I’d managed to deal him fourteen lashes — or fifteen even, because I think I’d lost count after the tenth one.

With every stroke of the lash, Morbian lost a shield. Predictably, the spell had done nothing to improve my health. For two reasons: firstly, I wasn’t wounded, and secondly, it wasn’t dealing any damage at all to the Horseman.

“Is that all?” he jeered once my summoned weapon had vanished. “I heard you were supposed to be a god slayer! Don’t disappoint me, mongrel. You’ll have to try harder.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” I said, casting Electric Arc which predictably crumbled impotently in a cascade of flashes of light. “I’m much prettier than they say.”

“I still can’t work out how you managed to kill Janus,” Morbian said, taking a step toward me. “We met up a couple of times, and I could never get the upper hand with him. His Avatar made him really strong — and he knew how to use it, too. But you, a miserable noob, you’re just a louse who has no idea of all the intricacies of the Game — and you managed to defeat him! Don’t get me wrong, I know perfectly well how you did it. What I can’t work out is how on earth you got the powers to do it.”

I thrust my hand out as if shielding myself from him. The funny thing was, he did stop, his eyes firmly focused on me.

“There is no secret,” I said. “Just some luck and a shedload of charisma. You’d be surprised how far it can take you. The problem of some experienced Players — or even a few gods and demigods — is that they tend to believe themselves above understanding inferior creatures,” I repeated Jumping Jack’s words almost verbatim.

He didn’t get the allusion, of course — or rather, he interpreted it in his own way. “Why would I want to understand you? You’re just a Time Master who’s happened to grab his fifteen minutes of fame. Very soon you’ll perish without a trace. Why would I want to understand a half blood who has no idea what kind of Seekers are after his Avatar? Because the higher you rise, the more attention you draw to yourself. You become a powerful magnet which draws steel to itself to its own peril.”

“Does that mean you’re after the Avatar too?”

“I’ve just told you! That’s exactly why I had to meet up with Janus. But the bastard was a Destroyer god, wasn’t he? You just couldn’t touch him. So there I was, in one of the technogenic worlds minding my own business, and I got the word that Two-Face had just been killed! By a half-blood newb, of all creatures. You can’t blame me for wanting to take a look at you. So I followed you for a while. I wanted to study you. And once I’d realized that you were nothing special and you’d just had a lucky break...

what a shame the winner can only take one Avatar. But you know that yourself, don't you?"

I didn't, but I made a mental note, all the while shaking in my sodden boots.

Morbian shrugged as if disappointed with my apparent inadequacy. He took another step forward, shortening the distance between us.

I raised my hand again. "I'm a Savior!"

"So what? You don't have Resurrection, do you? How about Righteous Fire, Shield of the Lamb or Righteous Blow — no, eh? And now you don't even have Walking on Water, either. The Grand Master told me almost everything about you. You have nothing left, apart from the sword and this scared girl with her grenade. She's very welcome to throw it at me, by the way. It won't even halve my Mantles."

"That's right. But as I've just said, your problem is that you don't seem to be interested in the lives of inferior creatures. Did you notice that this forest looks remarkably good for this time of year? It's as if someone invisible takes constant care of it."

I unclenched my fist, making a show of holding Jack's whistle with two fingers. I brought it to my lips and blew as hard as I could.

Nothing happened. The silence was absolute. Morbian paused, puzzled, then began laughing, harder and harder, until he guffawed, wiping the tears of laughter while holding his stomach with his other hand.

"Give it to me," he finally said. "I wanna take a look."

He made a slight motion with his hand. The whistle slid out of my fingers and flew into his grip. Morbian caught it and squinted, studying it, then crumpled it in his hand. With a crunch, its broken pieces fell to the snow.

“What’s this, some kind of summoning artifact? Who was supposed to turn up? Some infernals? Hell hounds? Drakkans?”

“Just some fluorites.”

My answer seemed to have doubled him up. Not literally, of course. He creased up, leaning his hands on his knees, apparently unable to sit up straight with laughter. He was laughing so hard he was almost sobbing, unable to catch his breath.

“Fluorites! Oh yes! Fluorites!”

“That’s right,” I said as I sensed the barely audible buzzing of wings. “Arts, *now!*”

The grenade’s pin was already loose on the girl’s finger. She took a good swing and lobbed it, then leapt aside, taking cover behind a tree.

I cast another Mantle on myself.

Morbian stopped laughing. He looked down at the grenade lying by his feet and stepped on it with a look of absolute contempt.

The explosion made my ears ring. All I could see was the blue cascade of sparks; all I could hear was the buzzing of the approaching fluorites.

Just a moment ago, they’d been simply answering my call, arriving en masse from their swarm nest nearby. At the time, they’d been absolutely neutral to all three humans standing in the small snowy glade in the forest. But now that they’d heard the explosion, they all swarmed down, attracted to a new enemy: a white-haired Player who’d made all the noise. The wretched noise that was upsetting their lives.

Morbian must have realized that things hadn’t gone according to plan when he saw the Katzbalger in my hands. I rushed toward him, watching the tiny creatures out of the corner of my eye as they tried to sink their sharp teeth into their offender’s flesh. A slain fluorite dropped to the ground in a shower of blue sparks, then a second... a third... a fourth... I lost count because no one — apart from Litius, maybe — could count the numbers of little critters that kept arriving at the scene. Tens of dozens of furious little beasts.

Morbian showed enviable reaction times. A jet of fire streamed from his fingertips, streaking through the sky in search of any attackers. With a squeaking and rustling of wings, a rain of charred little bodies showered to the ground. The air stank of burned flesh.

Still, you can’t empty the sea with a single bucket. Nor should you underestimate your enemy. There’s no way one single person can defeat fluorites on their home turf, even if he is a Horseman of the Apocalypse.

Morbian screamed with pain. The sound startled me, almost making me stop in my tracks. His magic shields were gone, no longer offering him protection from physical attacks. A swarm of fluorites were now sinking their teeth into his body, their ranks way too numerous even after his napalm attack.

His torment-filled eyes focused on me. His clenched hand rose in my direction. Blood was running from his wounds; the gaps in his damaged skin revealed the flesh beneath. He must have realized that he was now closer to death than ever before.

He unclenched his fingers, sending a powerful invisible wave which hit the ground behind me and spread, covering an area of six foot in diameter and consuming me whole, breaking my bones and twisting my joints.

But I was prepared for something like that.

[∞]

I didn’t try to dodge it. I just slid to the ground like a baseball player in a desperate dive to reach the base. Of course, you couldn’t have found a person farther from baseball than myself, but it did work. The shock wave rolled past, allowing me to jump back to my feet and speed toward my Nemesis.

He was only eight or nine paces away from me now. His body began to darken, acquiring a reddish hue, until he was bright orange. Those fluorites still clinging to him dropped off, their wings charred. Some managed to recoil just in time.

Then I realized. This was the same spell he’d used to melt the snow. It must have been some sort of combat variety turning a Player into a walking solar flare.

Still, I couldn’t back off now. I had nowhere to back off to, anyway.

I invested all my strength into one powerful leap. I must have emptied all of my body’s reserves. A wild scream was born within me: a primeval battle cry which my human hunter ancestors must have employed when they faced a mammoth.

Morbian’s mouth, too, opened in a last desperate scream. He held his hand in front of him as if trying to protect himself. I even thought I saw something in it. Some sand-colored object, hard and round, covered in dark specks.

My Katzbalger sliced through his hand. I looked on, fascinated, as his fingers dropped to the ground, not yet realizing that my sword had continued its travel. It was sticking out of Morbian’ head now, slightly above his temple.

It had cleft his head like a fresh cabbage.

I let go of it in amazement, staring into Morbian' surprised eyes which were slowly glazing over.

At this point, the world seemed to have come back to life.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 16.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Somnophorus. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You can now claim one of the following Avatars: Conqueror, Lover, Traveler. If you don't do so within the next 24 hours, one of the above Avatars will be awarded to you at random.

You've gained the Taming skill.

You've gained the Telekinesis spell.

Your fame has increased to 8.

There was still a whole bunch of fluorites left. Just think how many of them had arrived to my call! They were swarming overhead, fluttering over the snow just above a little dark mound of dust: everything that was left from one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

"What had happened to him? Did he die? Did you kill him?"

I turned around. Arts stared at me dumbfounded. Did that mean that she'd never really believed in our plan? Possible. Had she followed me simply through lack of choice, with Morbian on our heels?

"Three to one," I said.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s our score. Three to one. You only have to save my life twice more. Thanks for the grenade. That was a real good lob. You were right, I could never have done that.”

“It’s all right. We’ll settle up one day,” she said, heading for me.

“Just please don’t make any noise. They really don’t like it.” I asked, pointing at the fluorites fluttering overhead.

She walked over and stood next to me without saying a word. A strange thought came to my head: for Morbian, it had been a beautiful way to die, sort of. Right amid a snowed-in naked forest next to the ice-bound river, with hundreds if not thousands fluorites flapping their wings over his ashes like a myriad butterflies. And the silence — not a dead one but rather the kind of peace you find in cemeteries, pregnant with calm and respect for the dead.

“Are you gonna check what he dropped or what? Arts asked, shuffling her feet impatiently. “Another half-hour, and my feet will have to be amputated.”

“Well, you should have put something warmer on,” I grumbled as I crouched over the body.

She had a point. It might sound cynical, but despite all the deference I felt for my opponent, Players are materialistic creatures. They have no place for extravagant gestures or noble deeds, especially not when no one can see them.

Sieving through someone’s ashes is never a pleasant thing to do, especially when said ashes had been a living breathing Seeker only a minute ago. It didn’t make me feel sick, just a little squeamish like when you have to unblock a toilet with a plumber’s rod.

I felt in the lightweight ashes until I stumbled across something hard. I pulled it out. It was a rock. Not the kind I already had: this one looked more like a large precious stone.

A Fragment of Khvarn

Can be turned into a fine gemstone when brought to a Master jeweler.

Oh great. The only thing left to do was to find a Master jeweler. Never mind. Waste not, want not. I slid the rock into my inventory.

I didn't need to look hard for the next object: its corner was peeking from under the ashes. I pulled at it. It was a crossbow, and the weirdest one I'd ever seen: a tiny little thing with a pistol-like handle and a small clip in front holding microscopic bolts. Their surface shimmered, spreading a golden glow. They must have been charmed.

Pistol Crossbow 'Baby-1'

Charmed to deal an additional effect when used against other Players. Does little damage to sentient beings. No damage against other types of beings. When shot, deals additional damage with necro magic. +40% to your opponent's chances of becoming infected with Ghirris Fever.

Made by Master Lo De Gan from the world of Smithery

Oh. That was something new. Not the necro magic, of course, because I'd heard about it before, but the weapon itself. I could use something like that, that's for sure. But the maker's signature made it very interesting, meaning that it had been custom-made, most likely to suit the characteristics of one particular Player. Oh well, it was mine now.

I checked the clip. It held seven bolts plus the one already loaded, which made eight in total. All I needed to do was get the hang of it now.

I also picked up a small bag of dust. 549 grams which was more than I had right now. I needed another 27 grams to make a full kilo.

I put the dust into my inventory and was about to get up when my eye caught on something else. A small round object, yellow against the white expanse of snow, lay at some distance from the pile of ashes. It was broken in two — the very item Morbian had been holding in his hand before he'd died.

Breathless, I picked up the two halves and brought them back together, studying the ancient writings that covered its surface. My heart missed a bit as I realized what it was.

Jesus. What have I done!

Chapter 33

WHEN WE FINISH a long and exhausting task, we all react differently. Some of us might lounge in the shade sipping cold beer while admiring the results of our labors. Others stare in disbelief at the distance they've traveled in order to get to where they are now. Yet others have a bitter aftertaste, anticipating a new period of uncertainty now that this exciting and significant period of their lives is finally over.

I belonged to the latter, the only difference being that all the events had left a deadly acrid aftertaste in my mouth, and the uncertainty I was facing promised nothing good. The two halves of the broken seal were clinking in my pocket as I walked: the seal which that douchebag Morbian had knowingly placed right in my sword's path. He must have realized that his number was up and decided to play a dirty trick on me just as a parting gift.

On me? — I beg to differ! He'd just screwed the whole of Cesspit! He couldn't have done it better if he'd tried.

We walked along the lake. Its waters had already calmed down and begun to freeze over again. Give it another couple of hours, and the ice would be as good as new. We parted ways with the fluorites some of which still hovered undecidedly in the air, apparently thinking about finding a new home, while others began to disperse.

Finally, we left the thick of the forest and came to the shallow water-filled trench that had formed in the fiery Morbian' wake. The thin ice kept breaking underfoot, forcing us to wade through the muddy slush as if it were springtime. What kind of body temperature he must have had to defreeze the permafrost-hard soil!

“Oh for crying out loud,” Arts complained after getting another bootful of slush. “We just have no luck today, do we?”

“A little bit of dirt won’t hurt you,” I said. “You should be happy you’re still alive.”

In actual fact, my own Boots of Solophon performed really well, even though they might need quite a bit of cleaning after this hike. Luckily, I had Bumpkin who’d only be too happy with a task like this.

Finally, we got back to the road. Arts bent down and grabbed handfuls of snow, trying to clean her snazzy little boots, while I walked over to Morbian’ snapdrake still waiting patiently by the road.

The mount stuck out his long tongue and gingerly, as if hesitating, licked my hand. I stroked his short black mane and walked over to the listless bundle still straddled across the saddle.

“Grand Master, Sir? Are you all right?”

“Ooooh,” the bundle groaned, stirring.

I pulled out my moon steel knife and cut through his bonds, taking care not to hurt him. I ripped off the rags swaddling him and threw them on the tarmac, then helped the Grand Master to climb down. He wasn’t in a good way. One of his lips was twice the size and covered in caked blood, one of his eyes swollen shut, his right cheek covered in deep scratches. Apparently, the game he’d planned to have with Morbian hadn’t gone according to plan.

Never mind. He had no bones broken, that was the main thing. And beauty is only skin deep. In any case, facial scars are supposed to be sexy, or so they say.

“You did it,” he said, attempting a smile, then promptly clutching at his lip in pain.

I helped him to his feet. By then, Arts too had come over to us and nodded to him.

Still, I didn’t want to drag it out. I reached into my pocket for the broken seal and offered it to the Grand Master.

Already a sorry sight, now he turned completely pale, whiter than the snow around us. Even though he hadn’t appeared at all scared a moment ago, now he seemed to have aged before my very eyes. His lips kept mouthing something. Much to his credit, he quickly recovered from the initial shock.

“May I?”

“Eer... if you think so...”

For a moment, I thought he was about to touch my forehead in order to send me back in time to the moment when I’d fought Morbian, but he did nothing of the sort. All he did was take my hand.

After a brief pause, he shook his head. “We need to get back to the Community. We should contact the Kaheed, summon all the antenors and issue new orders to the Guards. It’s only a question of time before the remaining Horsemen arrive.”

“Arts, mind giving the Grand Master a lift? I don’t think he can ride on his own now.”

“What about you?” she asked, surprised.

Good question. The only reason Morbian’ mount hadn’t escaped was because of the heavy load straddled to his back. Our own, however, had shamelessly legged it — either for a stroll in the woods or simply back to his own stable. It was my own fault, of course. Trust in God but tether your

camel, or so they say. All I could say in my defense was that at the time, I'd had more important things to think of, too busy saving my own butt.

"It's okay," I replied. "I can walk."

Walk being the operative word. You couldn't lure a cab to a place like this for love nor money. It was perfectly deserted, not a house in sight. So it looked like I might have to put one foot in front of the other, literally.

Arts and the Grand Master had already climbed their mount, ready to set off for the Community.

"Sir," I said. "You don't happen to know where... where the Horsemen are supposed to arrive?"

He touched Arts' shoulder, motioning her to linger, then replied with a sigh,

"We don't know the exact place. Those responsible for the sarcophagi are already dead. And after everything that had happened, Morbian wasn't forthcoming with any information, as you can well imagine. Don't worry. We'll know soon enough anyway. Oh, and one more thing."

"What is it, Sir?"

"You can call me Numa. This used to be my name... a long time ago. Whatever's yet to happen, I'm very happy you rid us of Morbian. Otherwise, I wouldn't have lasted long, either. You can count on my support."

You have saved the Grand Master of an Order!

You've received a new title: the Seers' Guest

You now have the right to remain in all territories property of the Order.

The Grand Master, a. k. a. Numa (his name seemed to ring a bell; I might Google it later) tapped Arts on the shoulder. Their mount dashed off, sending a torrent of chilly air in my face. I raised the collar of my trench coat, shrank my head into my shoulders and trudged in their wake. It was quite chilly actually.

Still, I put my forced hike to good use. Firstly, I still had to choose one of the three Avatars I'd been offered. What did it say? I had the choice of Conqueror, Lover and Traveler. Morbian had been using Conqueror — and I thought I knew why. Lover... did I really need it? My name wasn't Casanova. And Traveler... I wasn't too sure about it, either.

Logically, Morbian wouldn't have chosen a weak Avatar. Which made my choice pretty obvious.

Avatar: Conqueror

Activation requires under -1000 Karma

I'd been expecting something like this. A Conqueror with a positive karma is a bit of an oxymoron. Which meant I now had two Avatars to choose from if ever I hit negative numbers. Not the best option but it did offer some food for thought.

The development branch that went with it I rejected straight off. I was too used to my Time Master — it had sort of become part of me. So I turned my attention to the skill:

Taming (Stamina). Mental control of semi-sentient and non-sentient beings, making them obey your will. The higher their level of sentience, the more successful the skill.

Your current level of Stamina allows you to choose two of the following types of beings, depending on their Elemental affiliation: Creatures of Water, Fire, Earth, Air or Mixed types.

How interesting. This was what Arts must have meant when she'd mentioned Morbian's Tamer skill. This could also explain why his mount hadn't escaped. The bastard must have ordered him to stand still. Which definitely made creatures of Earth a very tempting choice.

As for the other option, I wanted to go for Air but after some deliberation, I followed my Intuition and selected the Mixed type.

Next.

Telekinesis (Mysticism). The ability to remotely control inanimate objects. The higher the skill level, the heavier the object you can control.

Cost of use: 60 pt. mana

Cheap and cheerful. I was a bit pissed that out of Morbian' entire arsenal of awesome spells like Flight, Fire Jet and Solar Flare, I'd only gotten something relatively weak. But that was my own fault. Had my level been higher, I might have received something more substantial, that's for sure. On the other hand, if I leveled Telekinesis properly, I might turn it into a very dangerous spell indeed.

I stopped right at the center of the snowed-in road, looking for an object to try my freshly-acquired magic on. All I could find was a lump of ice underfoot. I kicked at it for a while to loosen it up, then stepped aside. How were you supposed to do it?

In the end, I didn't have to wave my hands in the air as other spells required. I just thrust my arm out in its direction, sensing a strange tension form in my fingers, then tried to will it to approach.

If anything, it worked way too well. The lump shot up in my direction. I even managed to catch it at the last moment... with my own face.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 3.

I wiped the snow off my face and shook my head. I might need to train with pillows first. It was a good job I hadn't chosen a stone to practice on: an urgent nose surgery was the last thing I needed right now.

I pulled out my phone. Either my provider was playing up, or this place was indeed out of range. Only when I'd finally walked over to the first street of dilapidated log houses did I get a faint signal. I dialed Julia.

"Hi," she replied, apparently happy to hear me. "Have you sorted out your work problems?"

"More or less. One of them, anyway. Are you very busy tonight?"

"A little, yeah."

"Think you could come to see me? I might get some wine and strawberries..."

"Are you crazy?" she whispered. "What strawberries are you talking about? It's winter, for crissakes! I'm on my way. Are you home already?"

"Getting there."

I'd told her the truth: I really wanted to surprise her. I'd planned to use the Gates to teleport somewhere tropical to buy some exotic fruit and whatnot. Still, my best-laid plans were disrupted by humanity's worst enemy: my own laziness. Also, she hadn't sounded very keen on it, had she? In which case she'd have to make do with Bumpkin's cooking, even though it was a rather questionable punishment.

Finally, I walked over to the city proper and saw the first signs of life: an occasional car, a slamming door, the screeching of a shovel against the snow. This wasn't the best of neighborhoods but winter had done a good job gentrifying it with its delicate white veil.

I stopped at a small grocery shop, most likely kept by one of the locals, but reconsidered. I'd be better off popping into one of the minimarkets on my way. The choice was probably better there.

After another twenty minutes' worth of hiking through lane after lane of more log houses complete with barking dogs behind zinc fences, I finally got to the train station. From there, my own street was only a stone's throw away. This was where civilization started in earnest, with tall buildings, busy traffic and half-decent supermarkets. I popped into the first one that caught my eye and bought a bottle of wine for 2,000 rubles[14]. Having spent my formative years drinking some carton-packaged gut rot, I was a newcomer to the fine art of wine appreciation. But now that I had a bit of money in my pocket, I really should start educating myself.

Bumpkin was busy making a chicken pie which was already sizzling in the oven, browning nicely. The smell made my stomach seize. Ignoring my pleading stare, Bumpkin grumbled that it needed another five minutes. Never mind. I put the wine in the fridge and continued hypnotizing the oven Hachiko-style.

By the time Julia arrived, most of the pie had already ended its journey in my belly. Why not? The Korl metabolism required a lot of nourishment! I just hoped it could handle copious amounts of Bumpkin's cooking, otherwise things might go awry pretty quickly.

"When do you find the time for all the cooking?" she asked the moment she'd walked through the door. "I hate spending time in the kitchen."

"Why?"

“Because it takes you a good two hours to toil over it, and they gulp it all down in less than ten minutes! And you’re the one to do all the washing up. What’s this, a chicken pie? You’re full of surprises, you!”

I gave her a big hug. She laughed, rosy-cheeked from the frost as always, and clung back to me.

“Are we gonna stand like this forever?” she asked.

“We’re constantly on the run as it is,” I replied. “We never really bother about truly important things. And sometimes all you need is a pause and a hug. That’s what really matters. Don’t you think?”

“Probably. Everything all right?”

“It is now. I had a bit of a hiccup at work but I’ve sorted it out. For a while, anyway.”

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“No point, is there? Just some boring specialized stuff.”

“Yeah sure. Everyone’s entitled to their own secrets. You can keep yours.”

“Thanks for your understanding.”

“Wish I could say the same. Don’t you want to offer some of your chicken pie to me? I’m pretty sure it’s worth a try. It’s probably finger-licking good, even.”

“I bet it is!”

Although far too good-mannered to lick her fingers in company, Julia made quick work of three large slices of the pie, then pressed her back to the wall with the expression of a prisoner facing the firing squad.

“Gosh, it’s just too good.”

“Jesus,” I slapped my forehead. “I forgot the main thing! Wait a sec.”

I took the wine out of the fridge, located the bottle opener and reached for two of my grandma’s precious crystal champagne glasses from the overhead cupboard.

“You shouldn’t really chill red wine,” she said, holding the glass like a connoisseur.

“Sorry!” I made a helpless gesture. “These aren’t wine glasses, either. We’ll have to make do with what we have.”

I watched curiously as she brought the glass to her nose, then did the same. It smelled of wine. The bouquet was quite, er, winy. I tasted it.

It took all of my willpower not to spit it out.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Honestly? It must have known better days.”

“Okay. Give it here,” I retrieved the glass from her.

Apparently, not all yogurts are created equal. Ditto as to the price: you can’t expect it to always be the indication of quality.

That got me thinking. I opened the lower drawer where I kept the bottle of vinegar which my Mom, for reasons known only to her, had given me about a year ago. Not that I’d ever used it — but just now I’d had an idea.

I stood with my back to Julia, shielding the bottle from her, then focused and cast Transformation of Liquids.

“What’s this?” she asked, staring at the bottle which was now filled with an acid-green alcohol.

“It’s Grande Chartreuse,” I said with a straight face. “It’s a liqueur — or rather, an elixir, as the French call it. It’s made with over a hundred herbs.”

“What, in a vinegar bottle?”

“It was smuggled in.”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 10.

I reached into the freezer for some ice cubes which had been banging around it for the last five years and did a quick bartender act, then offered her the result.

She winced. “Too strong for my liking. But it has a good finish.”

“It’s fifty-five percent.”

“You’re full of surprises, you.”

“I don’t mean it,” I said, getting the hint, and kissed her. She seemed to be expecting it.

We spent the rest of the evening like newlyweds locked in their apartment. We ate, drank, laughed and made love. Poor Bumpkin just didn’t know where to look, his expression similar to that of a cat refusing to bear witness to our debauchery. A few times he tried to hide under the bathtub and finally ended up secreting himself in the top closet.

In the meantime, we lounged in bed, feeling quite spent, and watched the TV. Or rather, I zapped through the channels while she occasionally asked me to linger.

“That’s only a Russian soap, for crissakes!” I tried to reason with her yet one more time. “They churn them out faster than Chinese cars.”

“I know, I know. It’s just the acting is so bad it’s actually funny. Look at this woman! What do you think she’s experiencing?”

“The way she looks, I’d say she must be desperate for a toilet break.”

“Nothing of the kind, stupid! She’s having a serious trauma.”

We laughed. I switched to the local news.

“Keep going,” Julia said. “It’s nothing we don’t already know.”

“Just a sec.”

“...according to eyewitnesses, the man was hit by a car which sped through Heroes Avenue opposite the Children’s Public Library and disappeared from the scene. The victim, who didn’t suffer any serious injuries, refused hospitalization...”

Okay. So much for the guards minding their own business. Apparently, regular memory-wiping spells hadn’t done the trick, forcing the guards to come up with a cover story. Well, well, well...

“Sergei!”

“Okay, okay, keep your hair on.”

I switched to the next channel, only to land on another newsfeed, federal this time. Judging by the picture, a new branch of hell on earth had

just opened somewhere. I was looking at what appeared to be helicopter footage of rivers of lava consuming everything in their path.

“This latest awakening of Mount Vesuvius has coincided with a magnitude seven earthquake in the west of Italy which must have triggered the eruption. The situation has been exasperated by a tidal wave which is heading for Naples, prompting the Italian government to evacuate the entire coastline and neighboring islands...”

Julia gasped. “How terrible! It never rains it pours, does it? Just think of it: an earthquake, a volcano eruption and now a tidal wave!”

“Exactly. Earth, fire and water.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, it’s as if three of the four elements have just been unleashed by someone very powerful.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I am now. I’m a bit susceptible to these kinds of things, that’s all. Let’s get some sleep.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep now. Not after I’ve seen this.”

“Come here.”

I lay in the dark next to her warm frame, wondering which direction the three Horsemen’s destructive fury might take.

And as I thus pondered, the sickly foreboding of an upcoming disaster began rising in my chest.

End of Book Two

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About the Author

Dmitry Bilik was born in 1986 in a small Russian town. A passionate reader since childhood, he loved nothing better than to create worlds of his own. He devoured classical sci fi and fantasy - so no wonder that by his early teens, he'd begun writing his own stories.

His path to authorhood, however, proved windier than he'd imagined. Dmitry graduated from college and went on to study at university. Then he got married. All those years, he treated writing as a hobby - as his own way to escape reality. Only ten years after he'd first put pen to paper, Dmitry started publishing his writing on the Internet, experimenting with a number of genres.

Today, Interworld Network is Dmitry's most popular series which has become a bestseller overnight, combining the best of LitRPG and urban fantasy.

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[1] The author refers to the Russian version of *Winnie the Pooh*, the 1970s cult cartoon series and the infinite source of Russian-language jokes and memes.

[2] Five hundred rubles: about $8.

[3] Koliva, a pancake — traditional Christian Orthodox funeral dishes.

[4] Hot tea with raspberry jam is a common folk remedy for colds in some Northern European countries.

[5] 45,000 rubles is about $700

[6] A catchphrase from the 1967 Russian comedy *Kidnapping Caucasian Style*

[7] 10,000 rubles is about $160

[8] Generally, Russians don't adhere to the European tradition of having a drink or two a day, whether with a meal or after work. Although they can easily overindulge on occasion, Russians traditionally abstain from drinking on a daily basis.

[9] From *The Master and Margarita*, a classic Russian magic-realism novel by Mikhail Bulgakov

[10] The author means two million Russian rubles, which is just over $30,000

[11] This is a reference to a popular Russian joke:

The doorbell rings. A man answers it and sees a strange woman standing outside.

“Was it you who saved my boy when he was drowning in the river yesterday?”

“That’s right.”

“So what have you done with his hat?”

[12] Gagarin Avenue: the main shopping street in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, where the novel is set.

[13] 700 Russian rubles is about $11.

[14] 2,000 Russian rubles is just over $30

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